Shuna no Tabi

(Shuna's Journey)

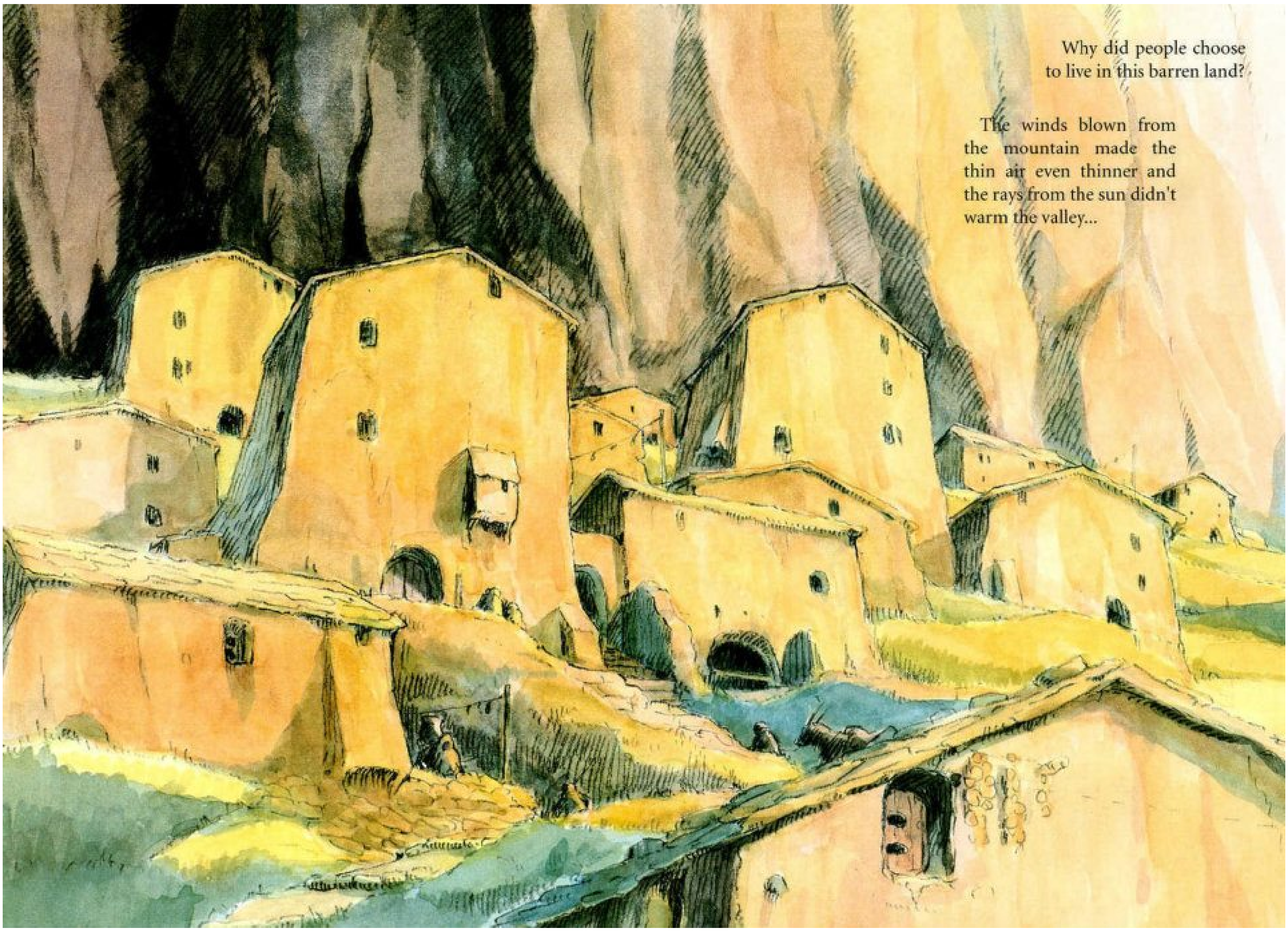
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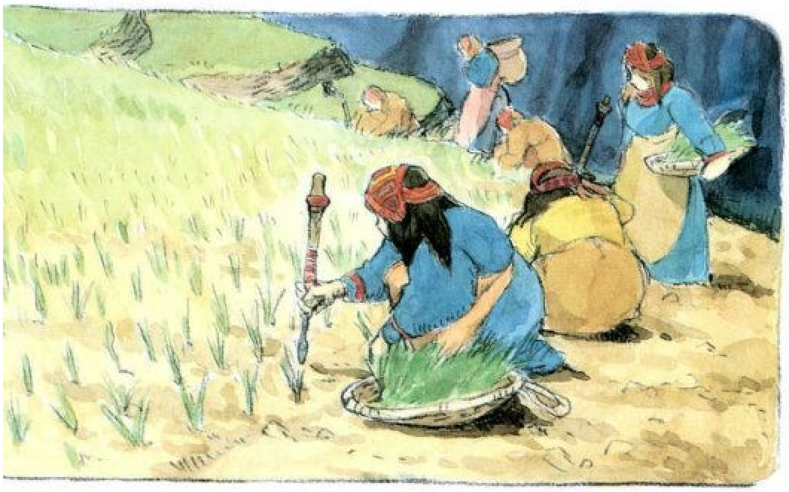
Hayao Miyazaki

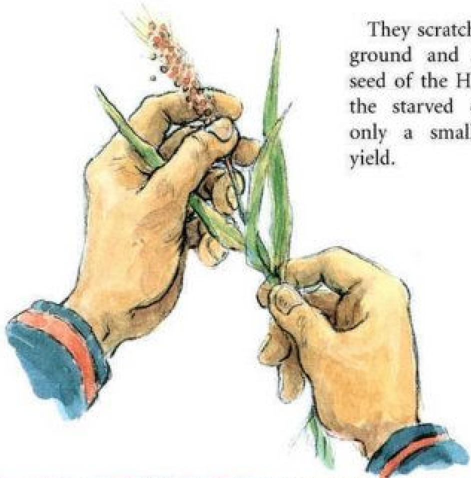


Setting Out

Once upon a time, an undetermined time - maybe far in the past, maybe in the distant future - was a tiny kingdom abandoned by time in the bottom of an ancient valley etched out by mountain glaciers.


Why did people choose
to live in this barren land?
The winds blown from the mountain made the thin air even thinner and the rays from the sun didn't warm the valley...



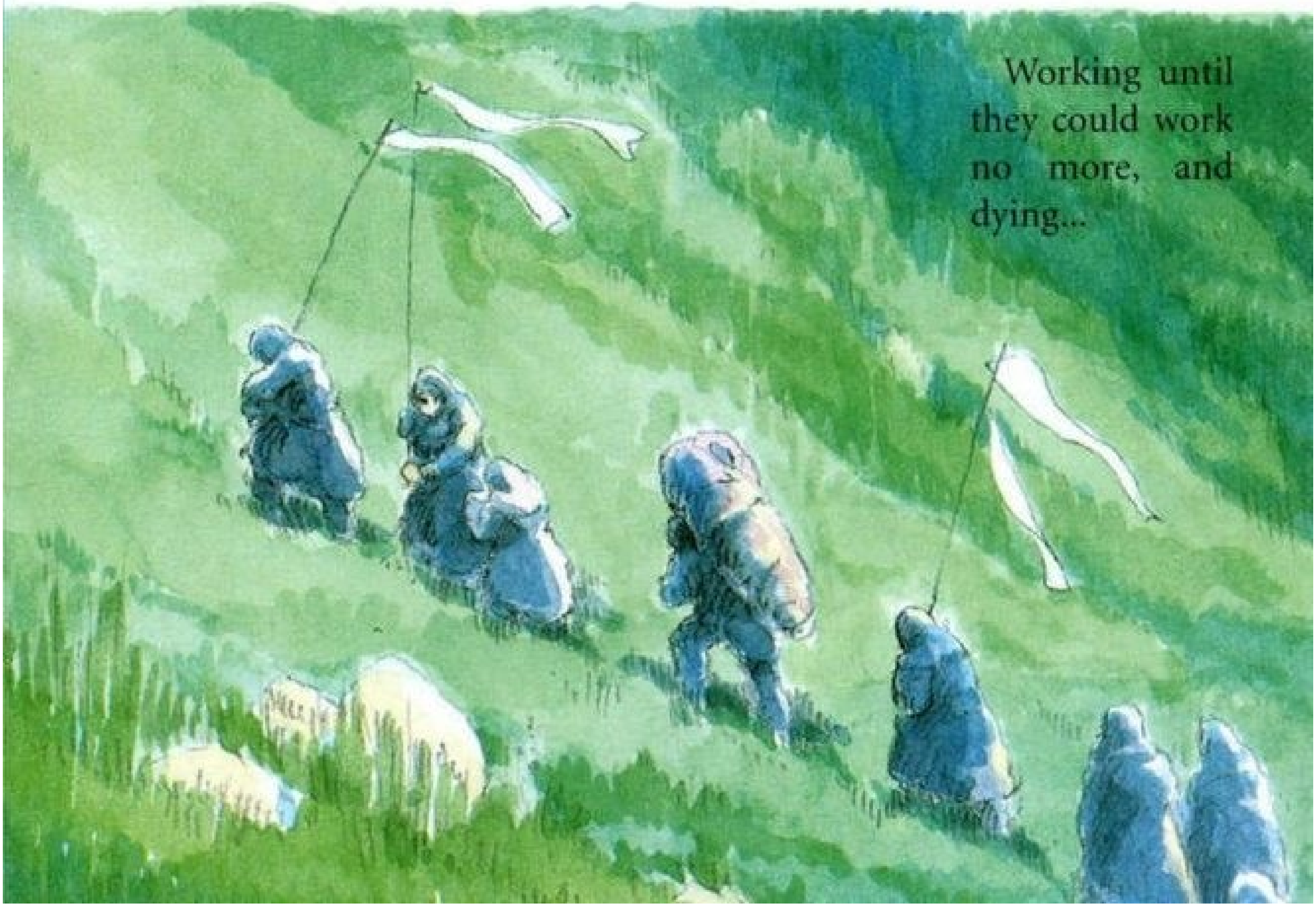


They scratched the dry ground and sowed the seed of the Hiwabie, but the starved earth gave only a small, faltering yield.

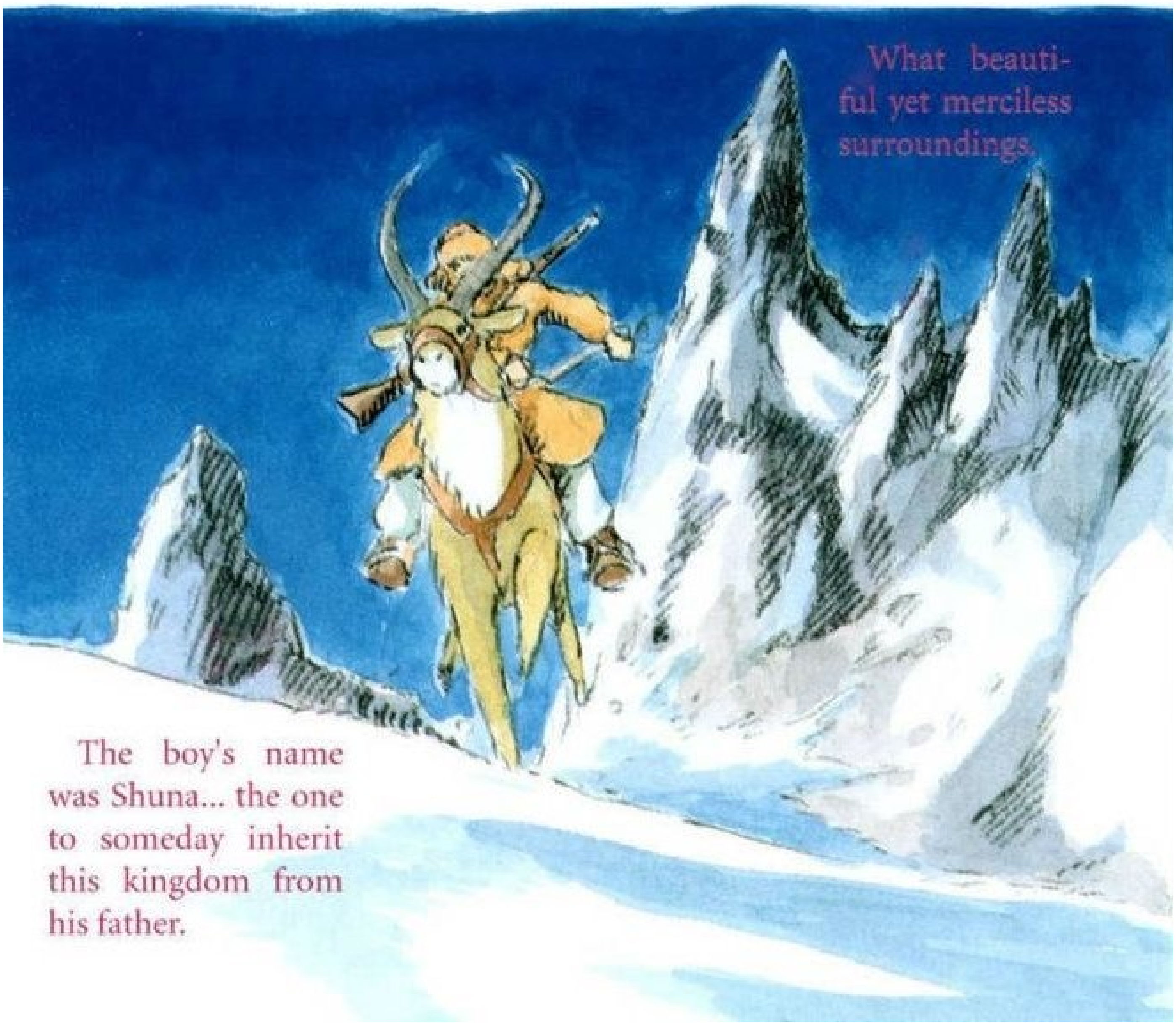


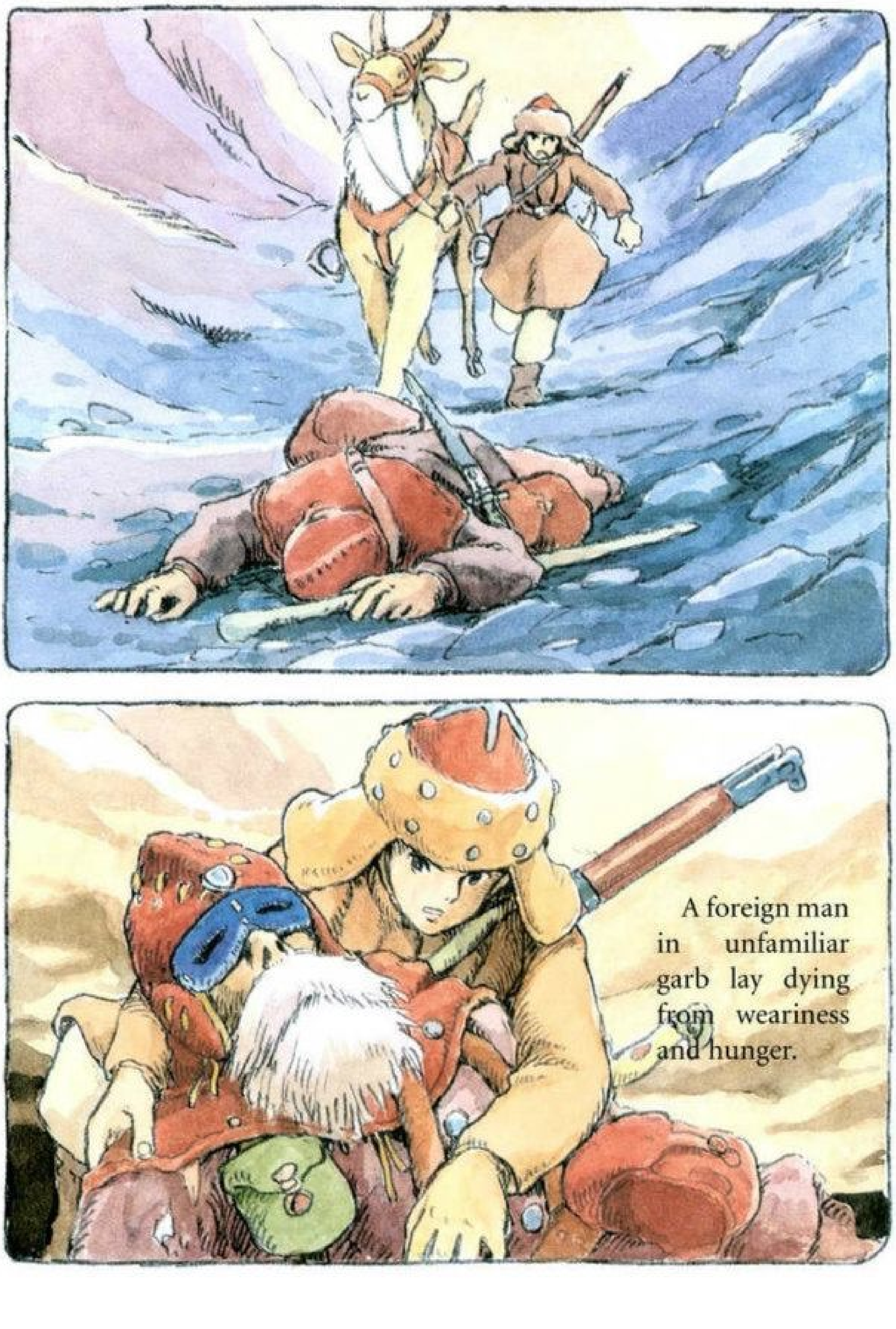
The Yakkuls were always famished on the scarce grass offered, and rarely ever bore young...

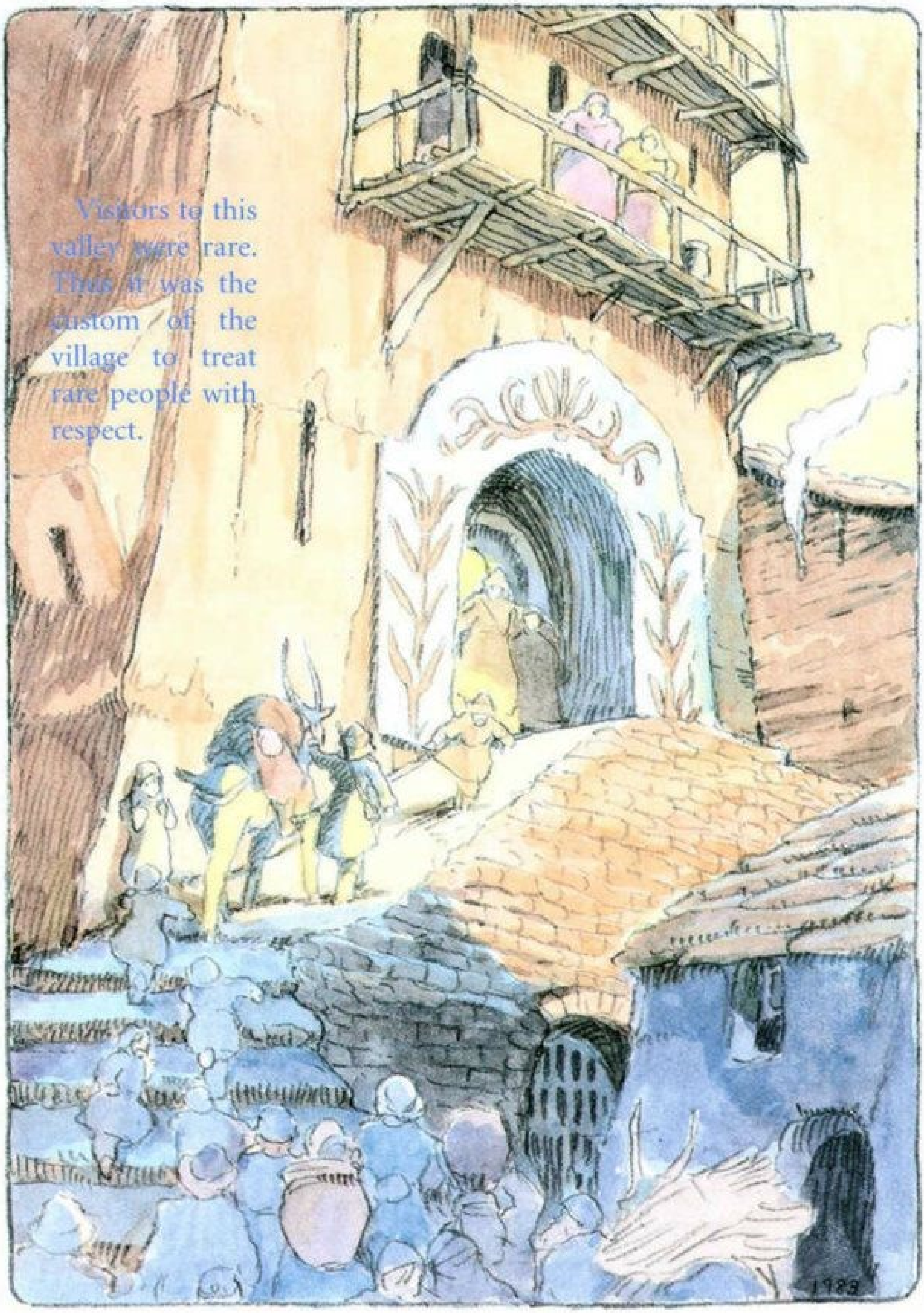

But still the people lived, thankful for the humble harvest.

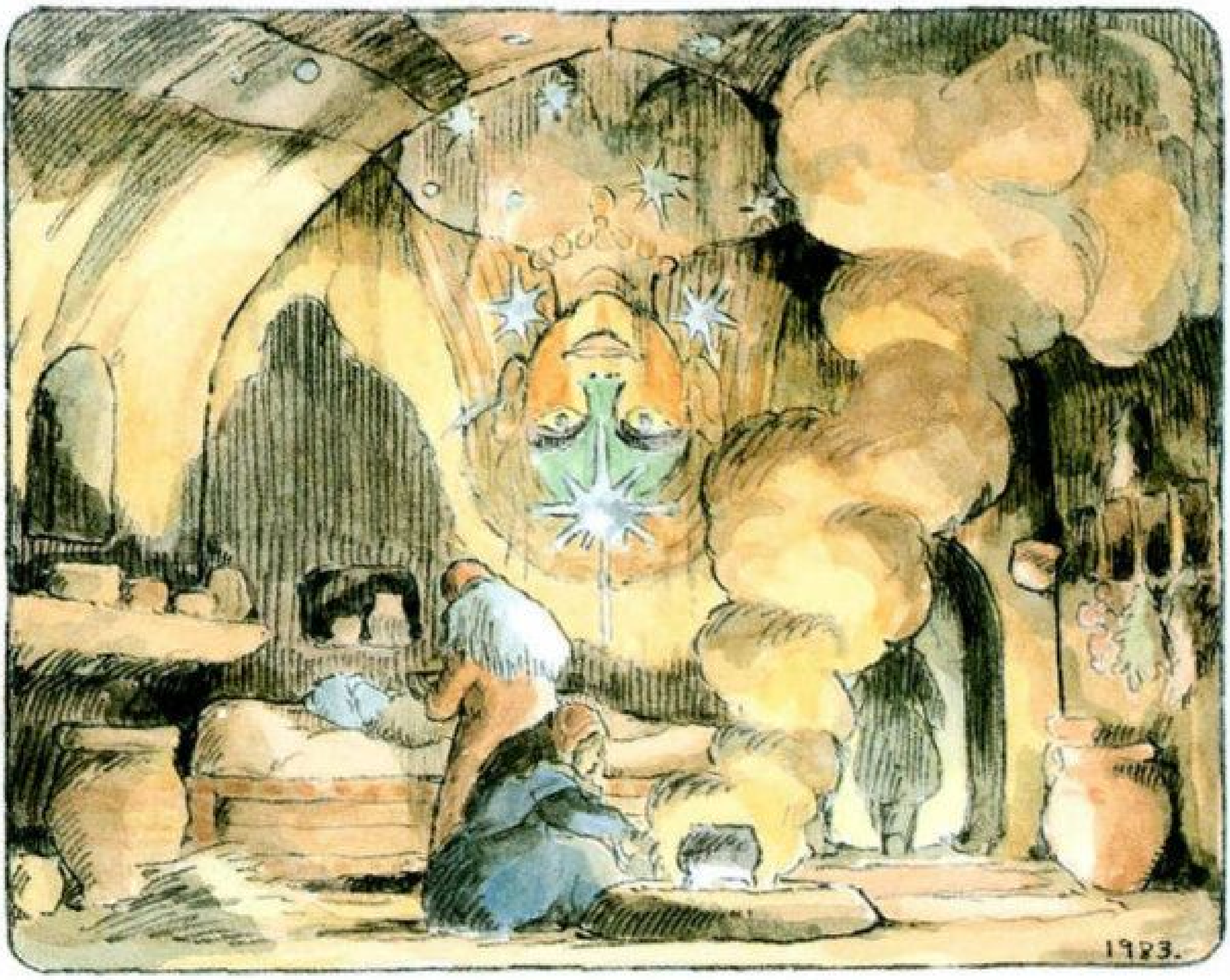

Working until they could work no more, and dying...


What a sad, poor life.


What beautiful yet merciless surroundings.
The boy's name was Shuna... the one to someday inherit this kingdom from his father.


A foreign man in unfamiliar garb lay dying from weariness and hunger.


Visitors to this valley were rare. Thus it was the custom of the village to treat rare people with respect.





Even the most effective spells and herbs of the old women of the valley couldn't save the traveler's life.

The traveler beckoned Shuna to his death bed. "I am the prince of a small country way to the east. The country was poor, and the people were always suffering from starvation."





Shuna asked, "Our Hiwabie seeds are small and poor. Can we have these?"

"You can. But to sow these in the earth would be futile... These seeds have lost their shells... they're dead. He told me that living seeds of this kind are wrapped in a beautiful shiny golden shell..."

"I wished to experience the people's suffering for myself and set out on a journey to find these golden seeds..."

"But I am now old... my strength is gone..."

In the bag were seeds the like of which Shuna had never seen.

"That traveler gave these to me. He said, with this grain, the people would be able to live happy and prosperous lives without the fear of going hungry..."

The seeds were large and heavy.





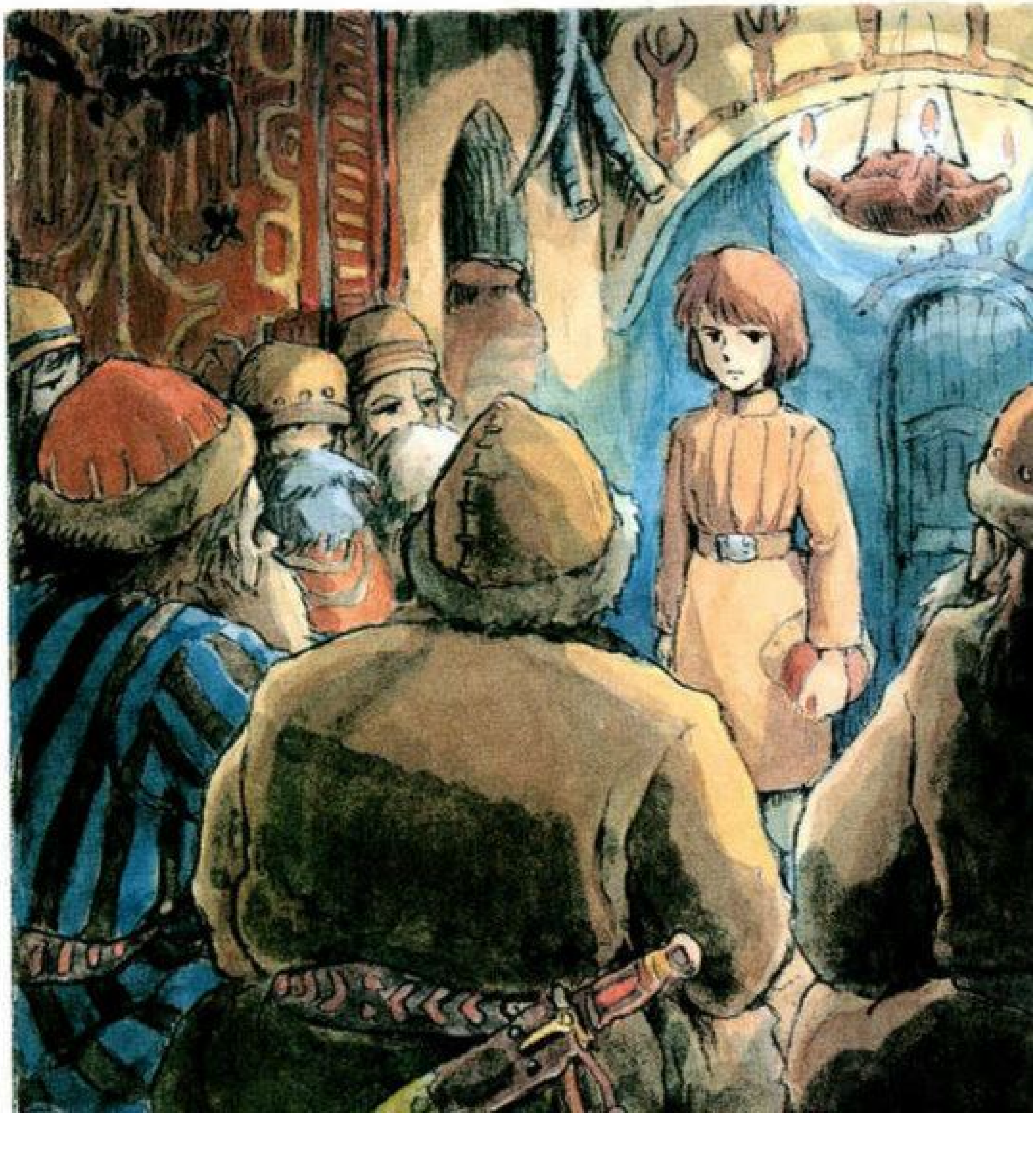
Far to the west where the earth ends, there are rich, waving fields of the golden plants...



The traveler passed away, leaving Shuna filled with yearning. After that, there was many a time that he would be found silently staring to the west.

His father and the elders tried their best to reason with him.

"We must follow our paths even if it is our fate to be poor, and allow ourselves to be laid to rest here."



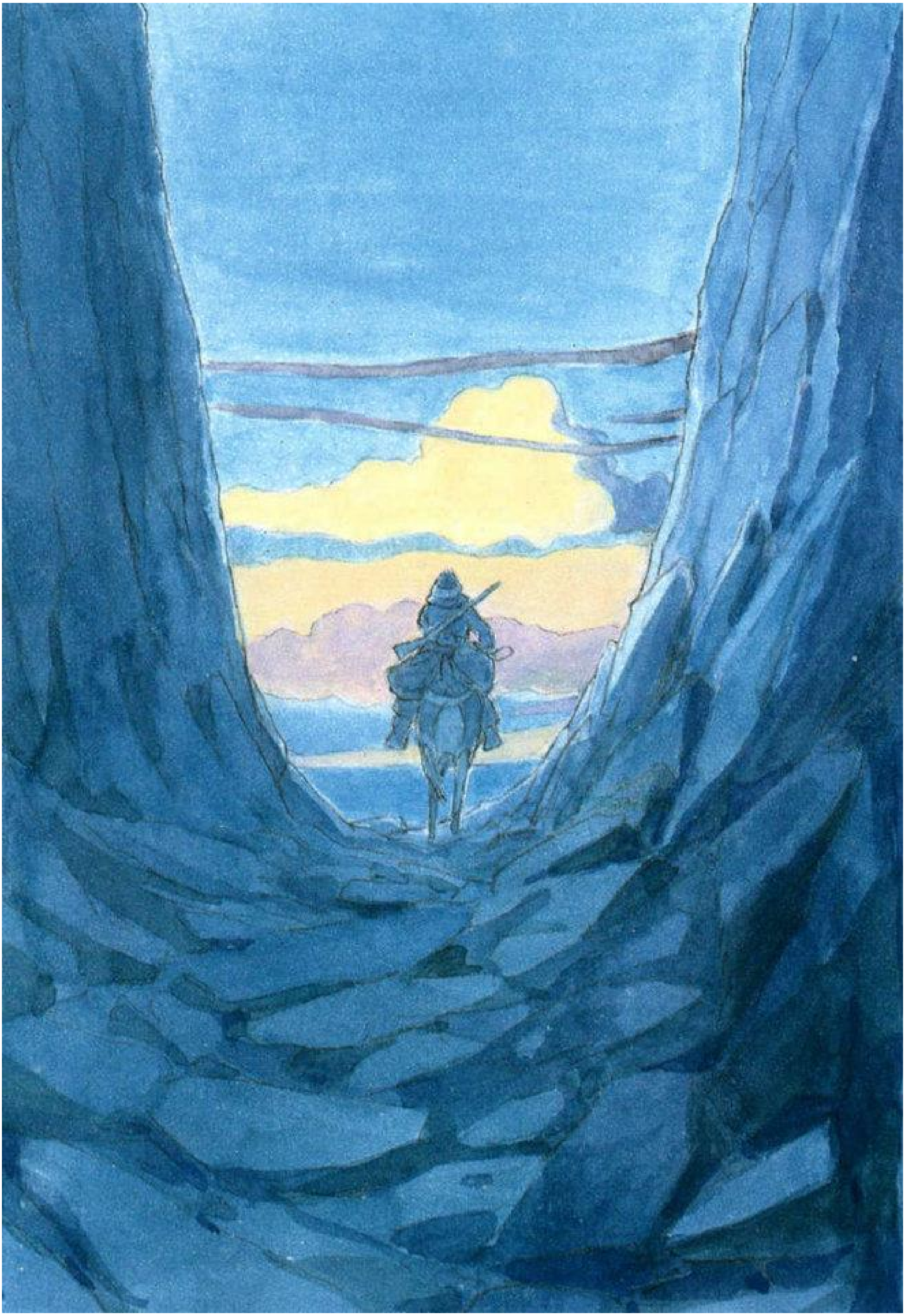


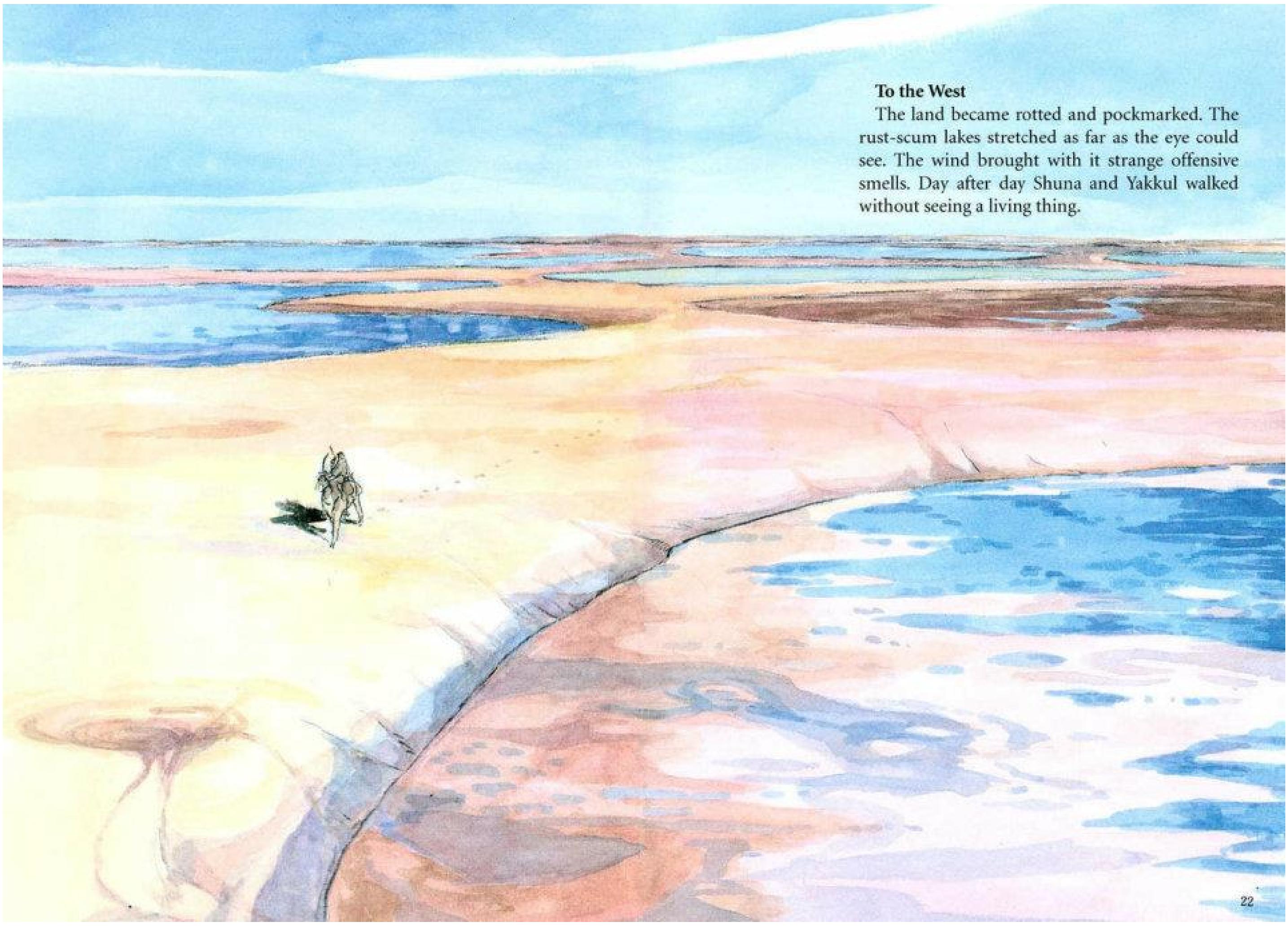
Notwithstanding, the time had come for departure. Nobody could stop the boy... the elders gave out deep sighs.



The women could see that Shuna was making far too many bullets for an ordinary hunting trip and knew that his mind was made up.

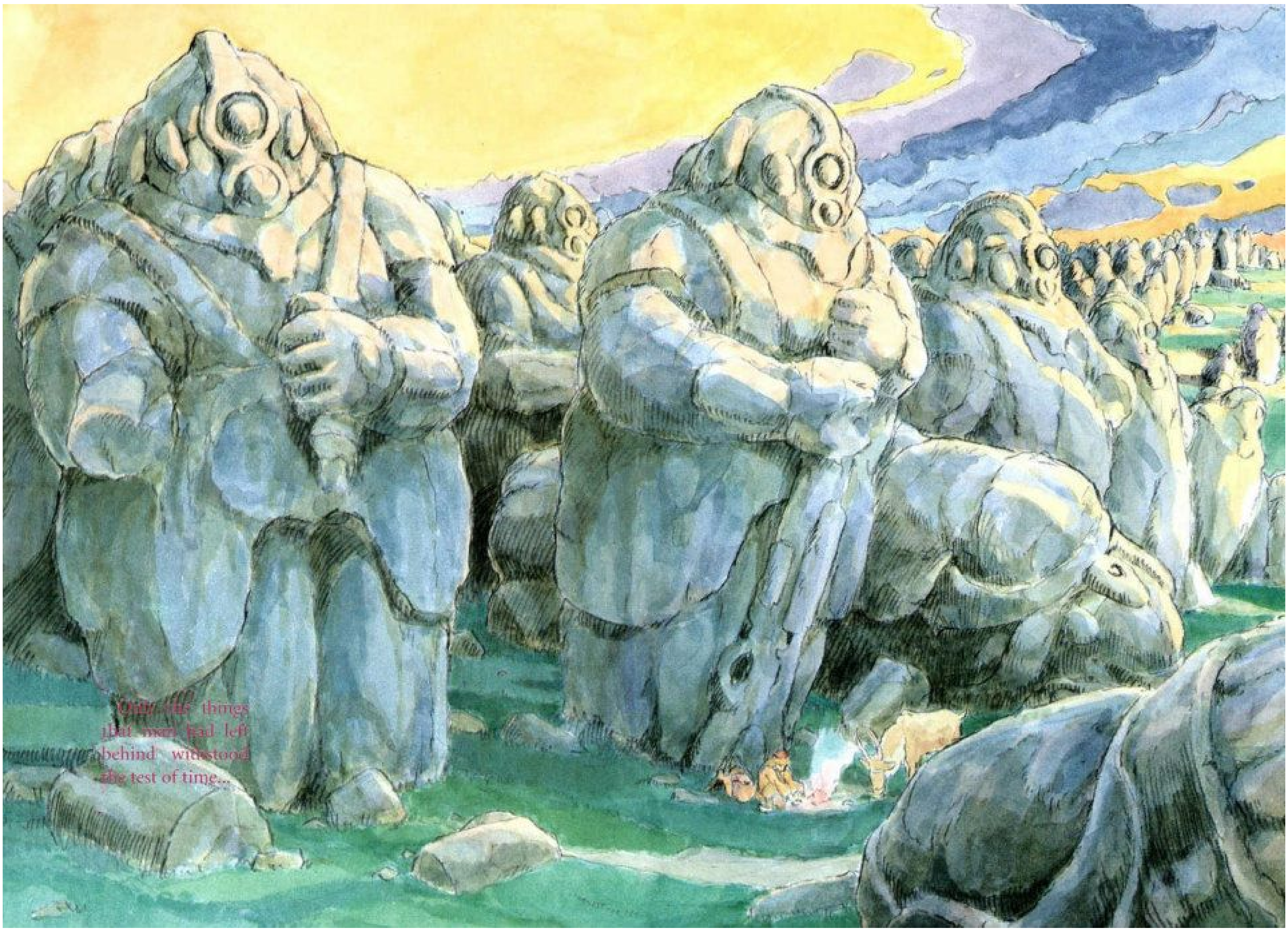

On the night of the new moon, Shuna broke the village law and saddled up Yakkul.

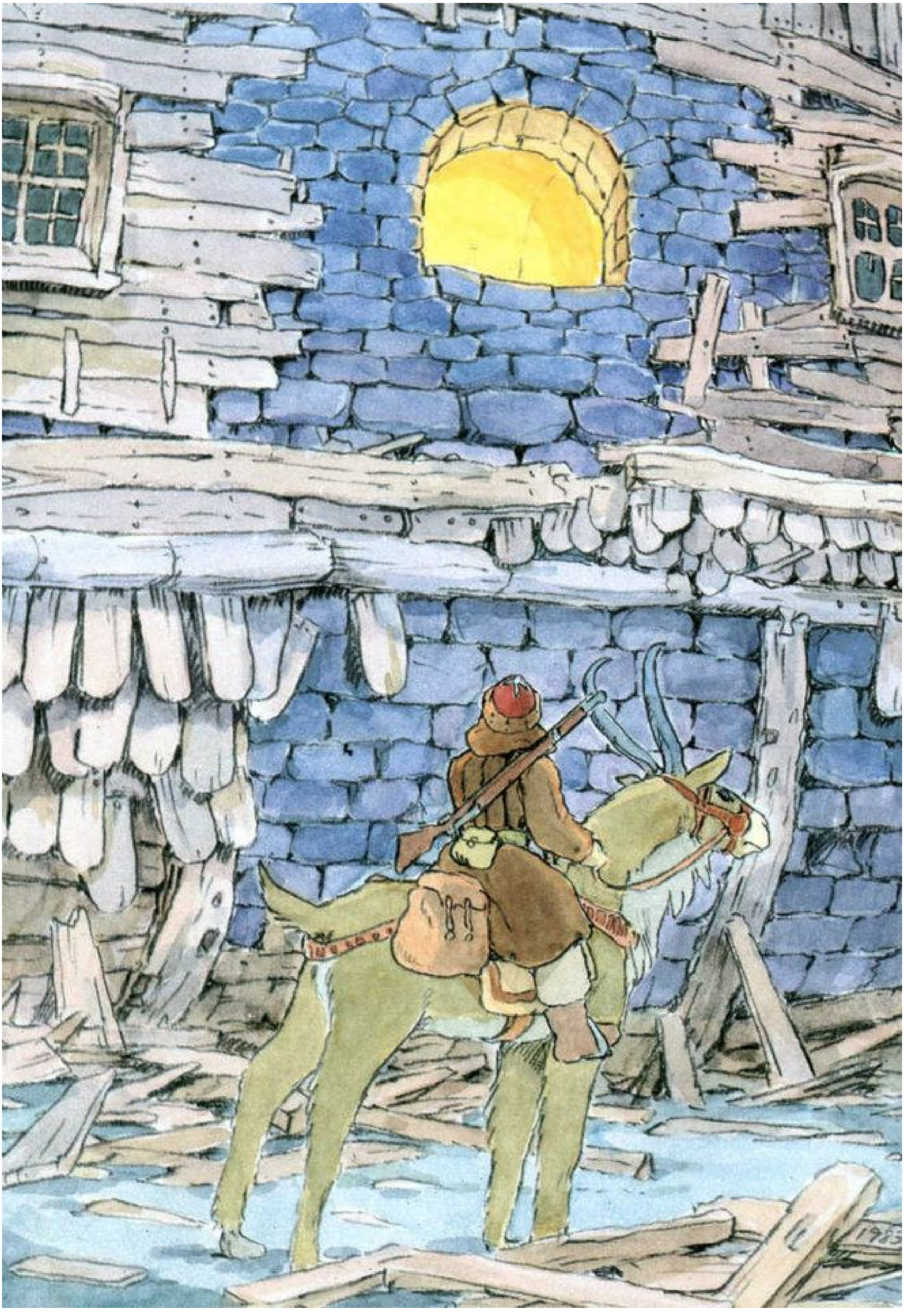


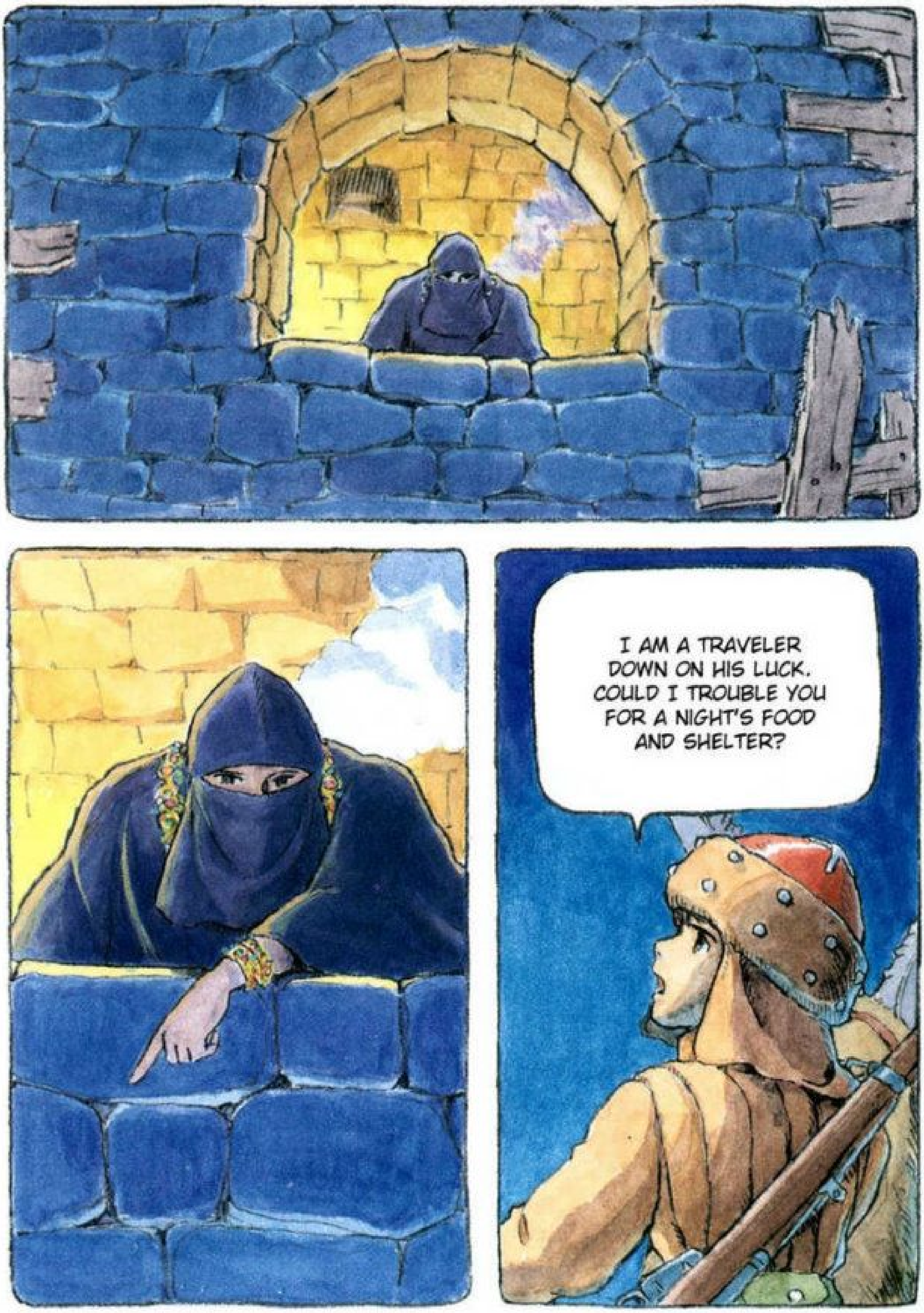


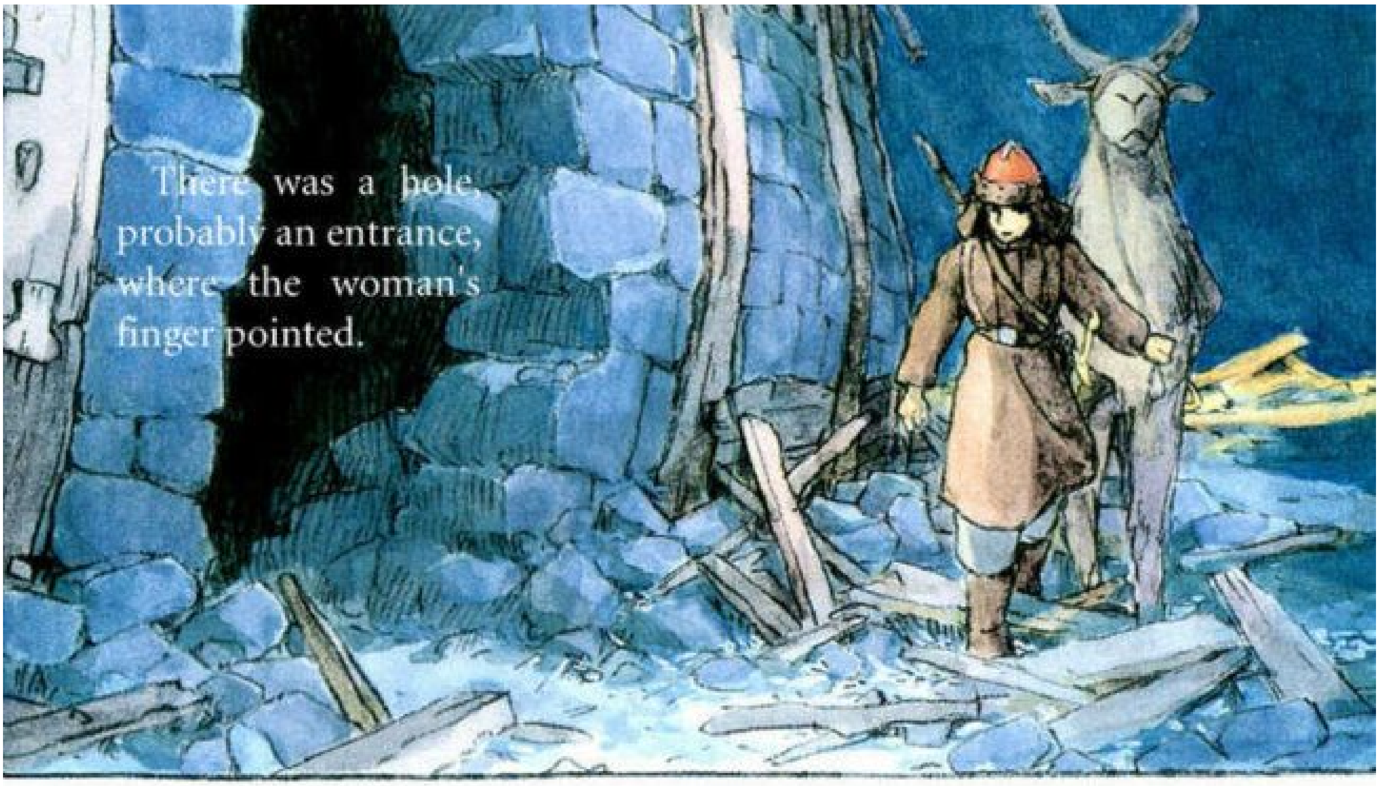
To the West

The land became rotted and pockmarked. The rust-scum lakes stretched as far as the eye could see. The wind brought with it strange offensive smells. Day after day Shuna and Yakkul walked without seeing a living thing.

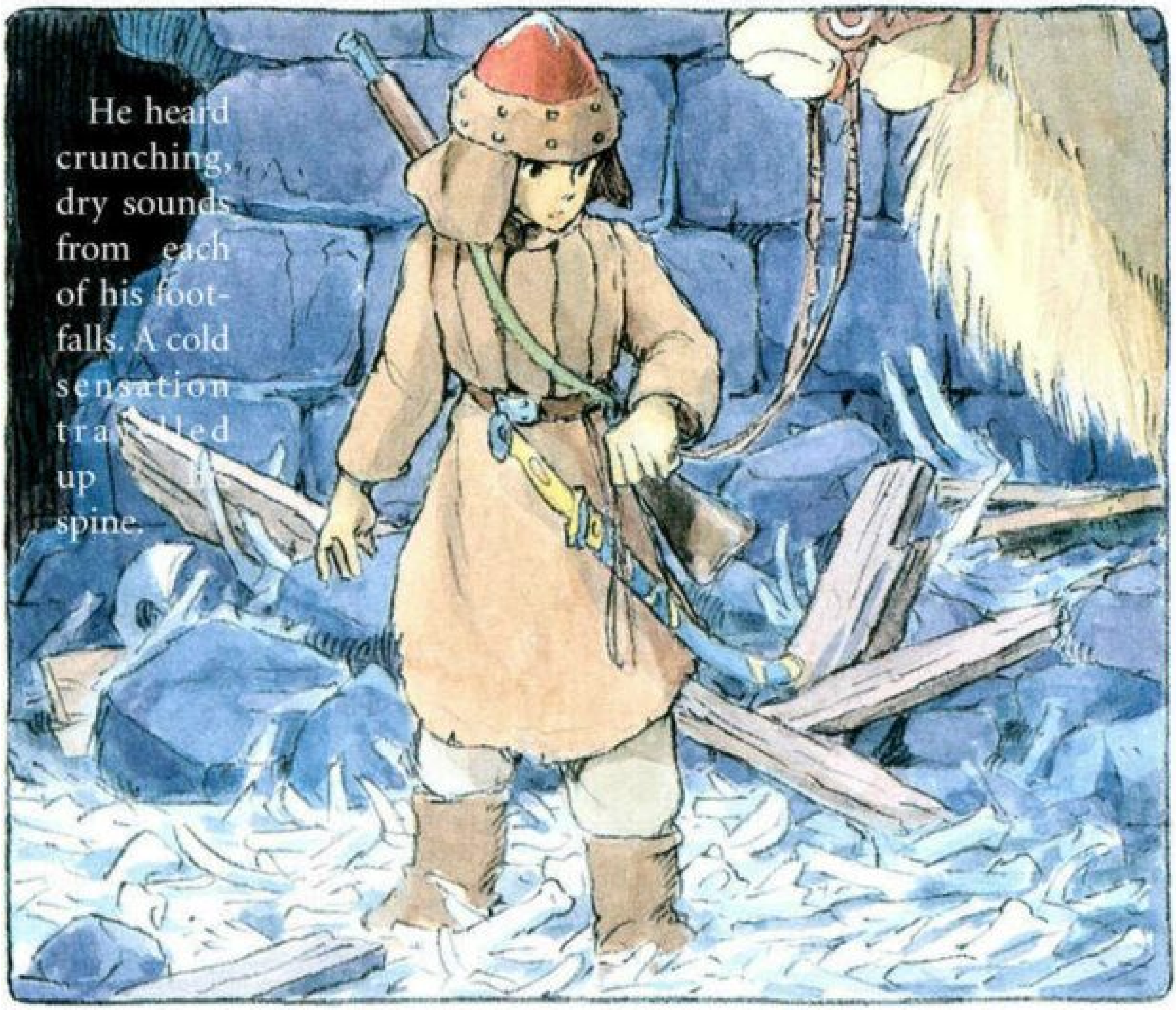

Only the things that man had left behind withstood the test of time...



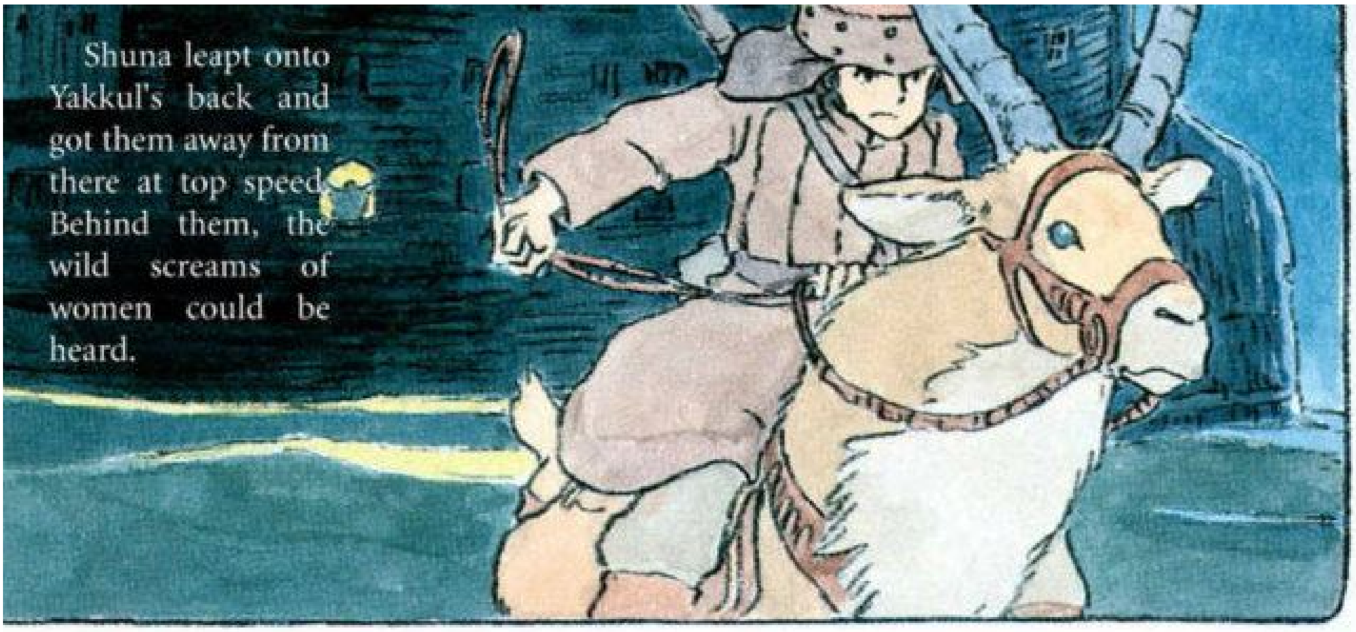

I AM A TRAVELER DOWN ON HIS LUCK. COULD I TROUBLE YOU FOR A NIGHT'S FOOD AND SHELTER?



There was a hole, probably an entrance, where the woman's finger pointed.



He heard crunching, dry sounds from each of his foot-falls. A cold sensation travelled up his spine.

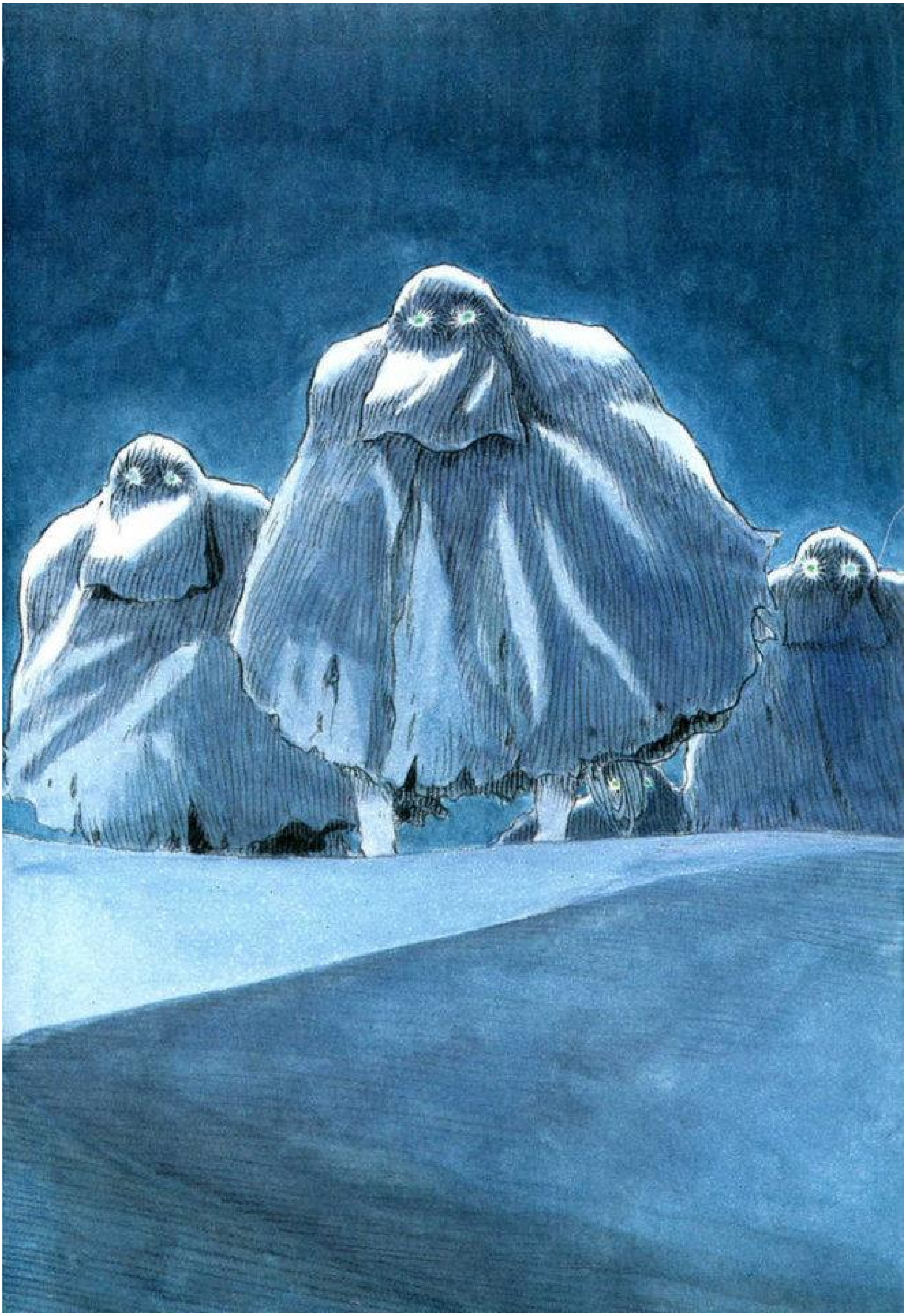


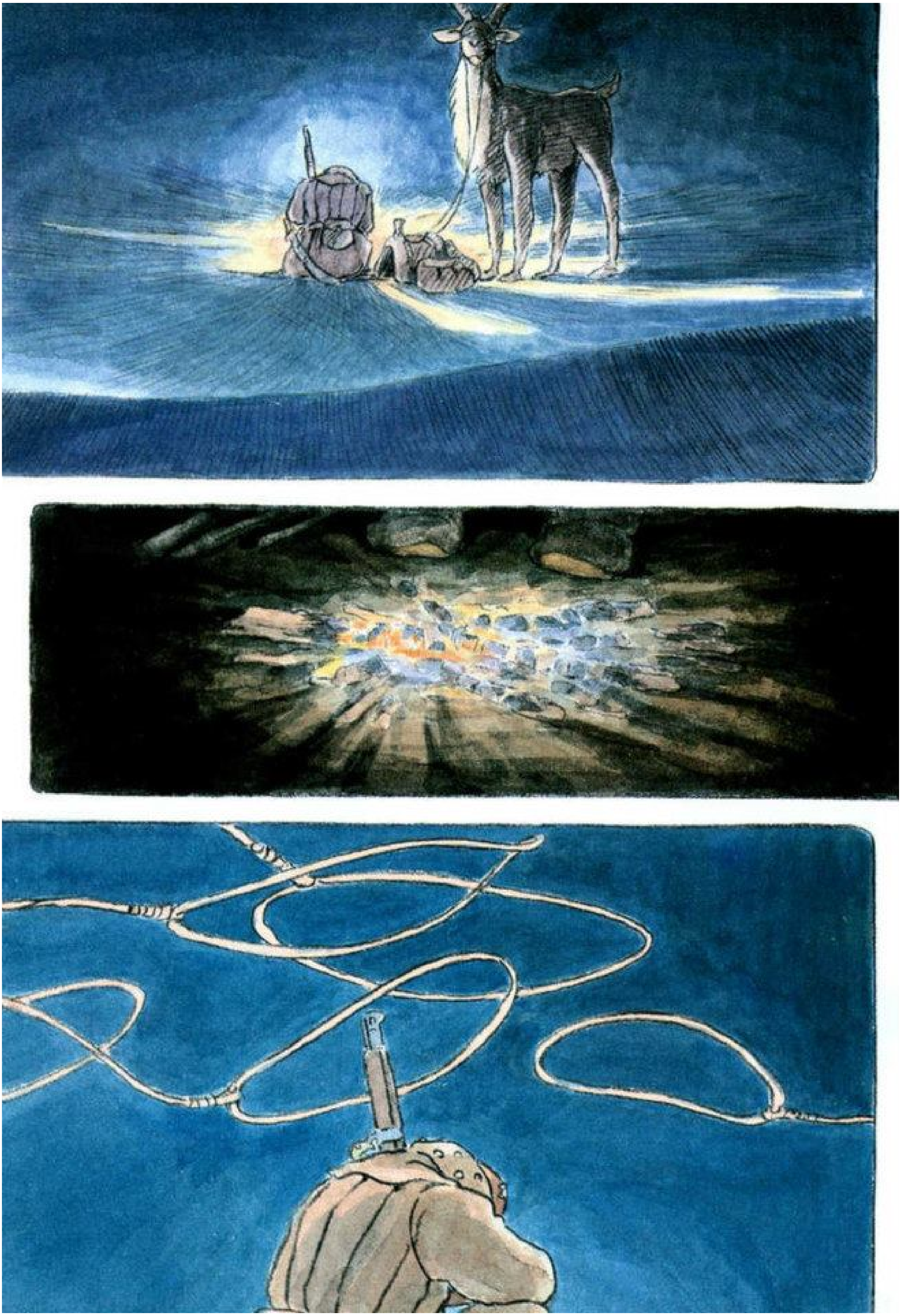


The mess of bones were plainly human. They had been burned, broken, and it looked as though the marrow had been sucked out.

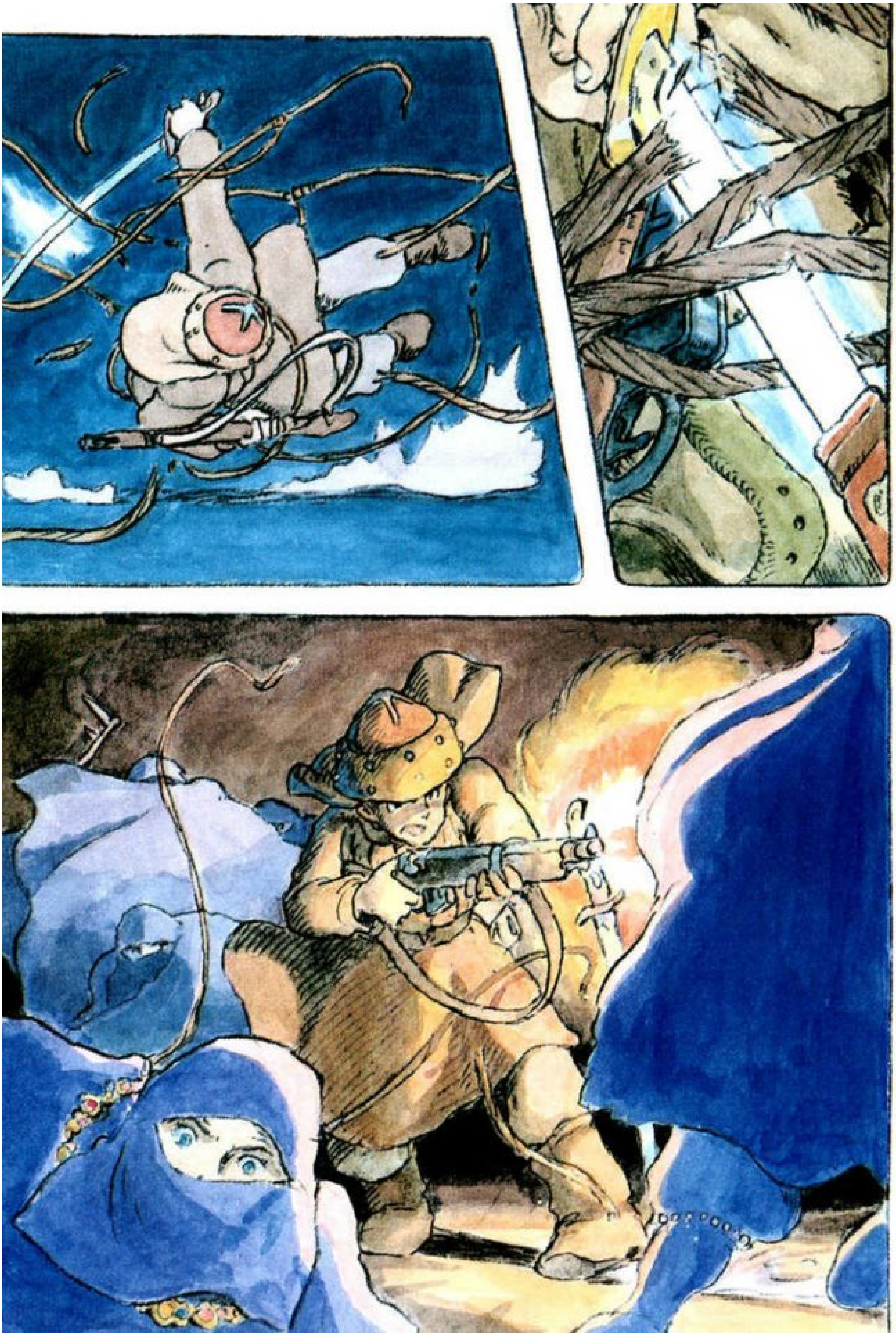
T/L-Note: Goor = Cannibal



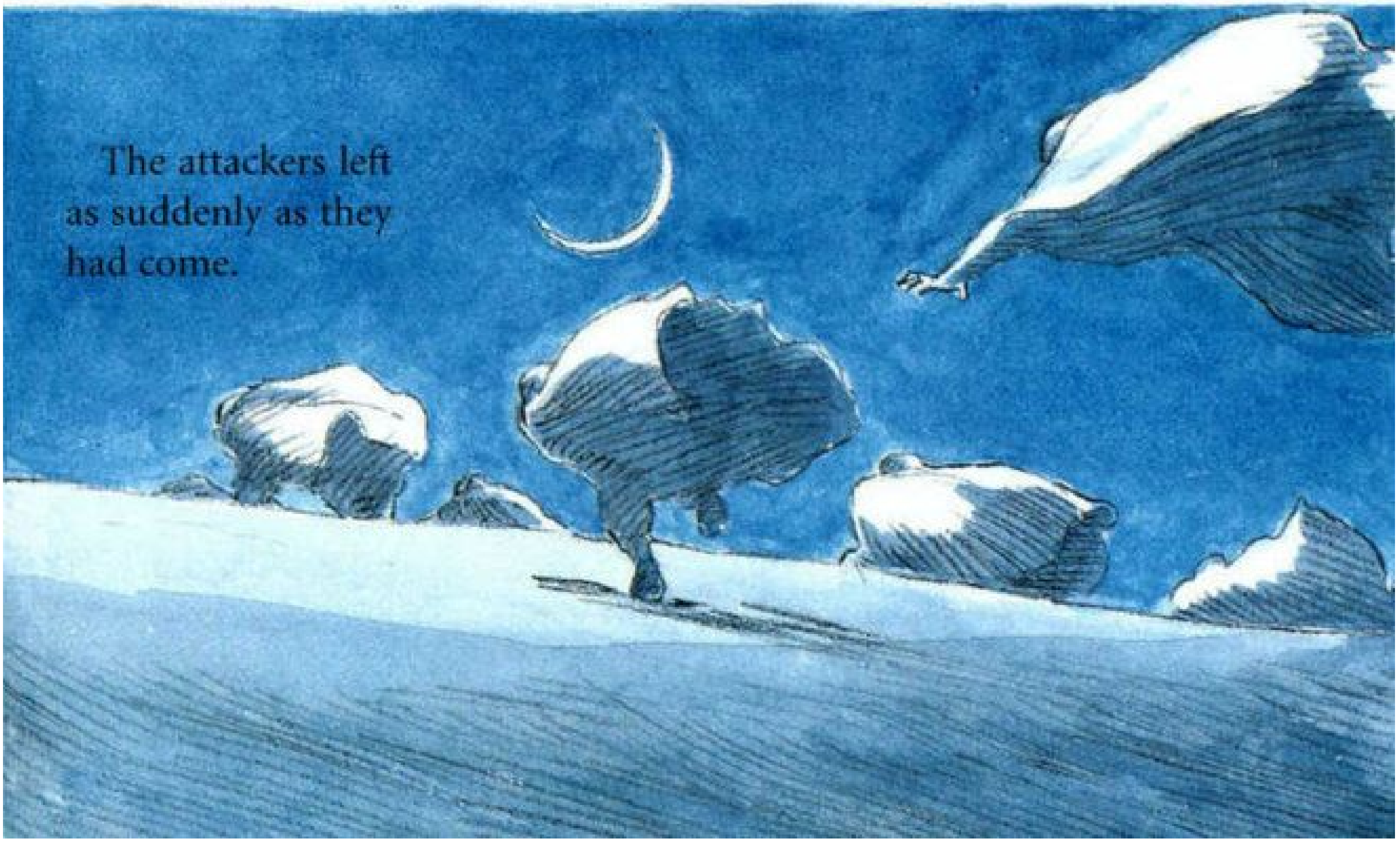


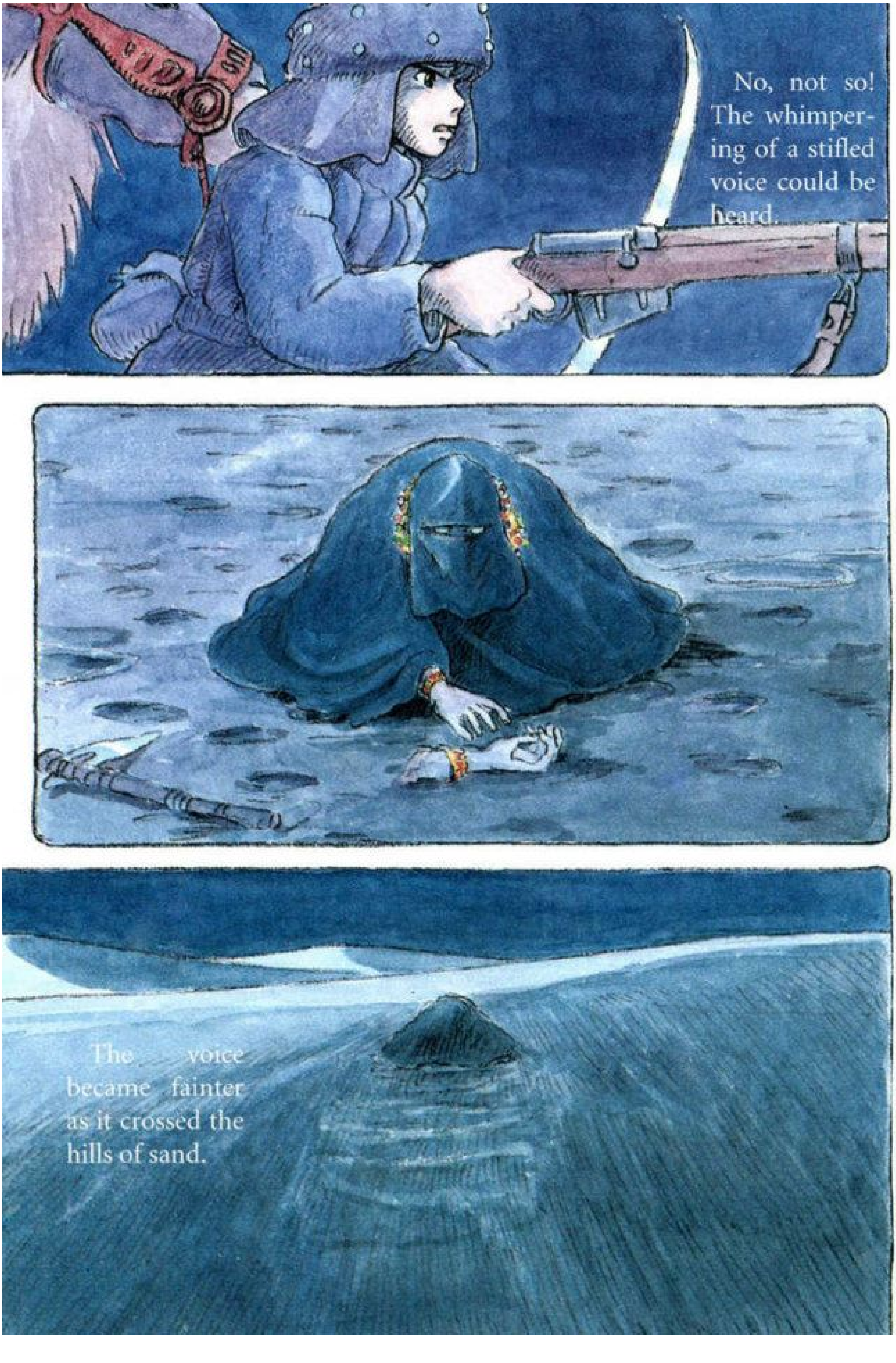


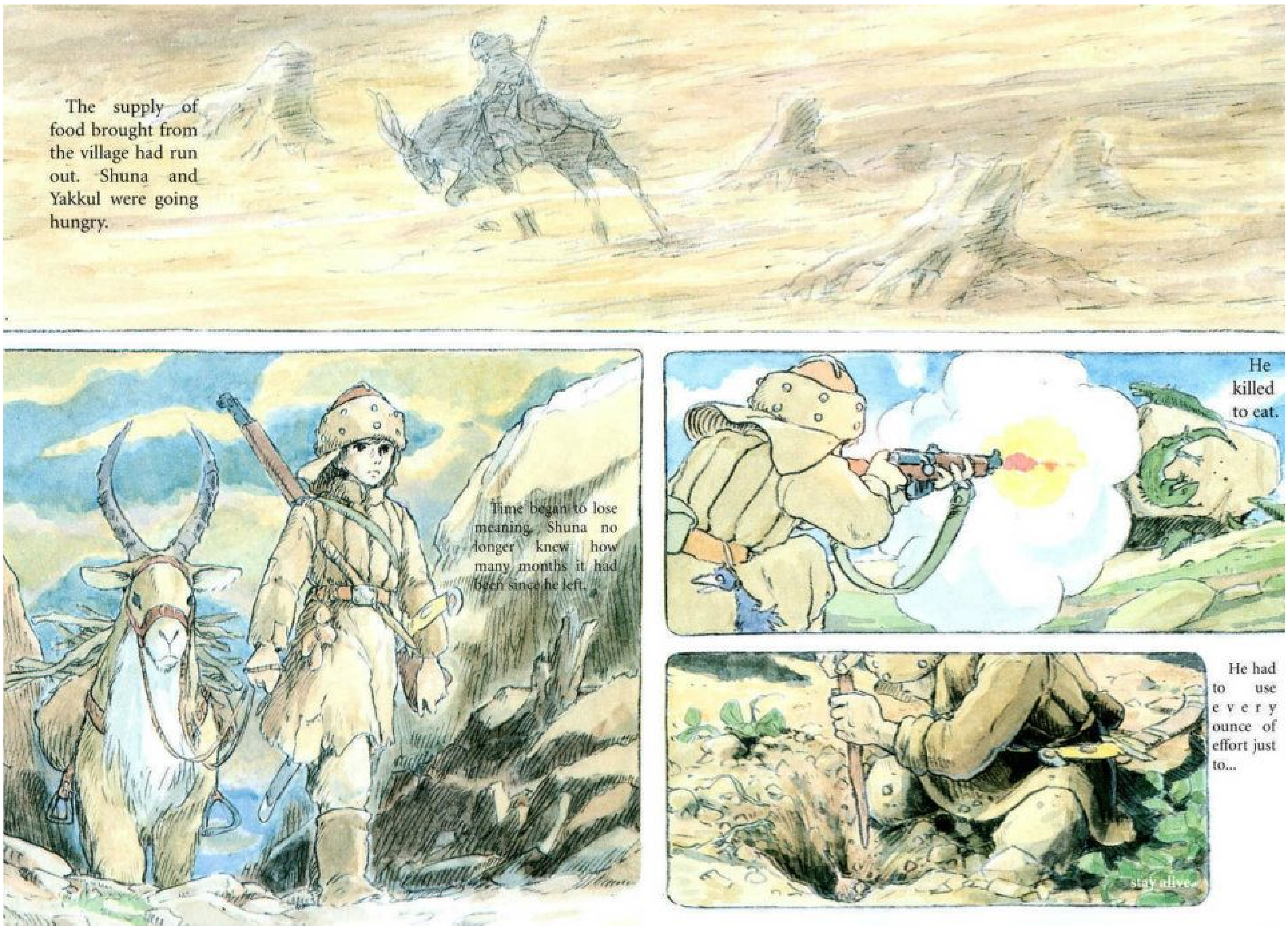




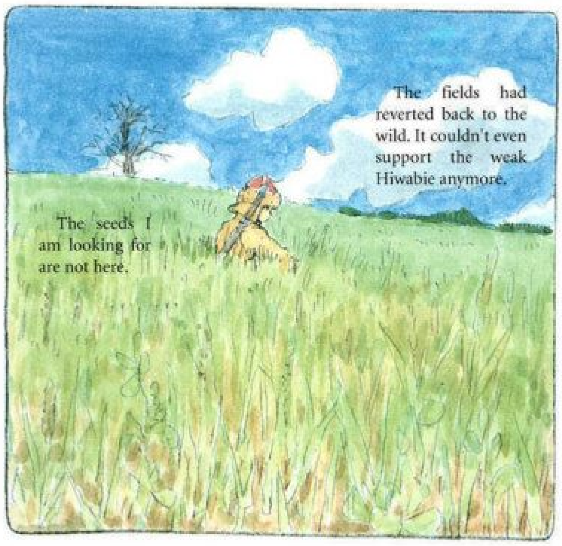


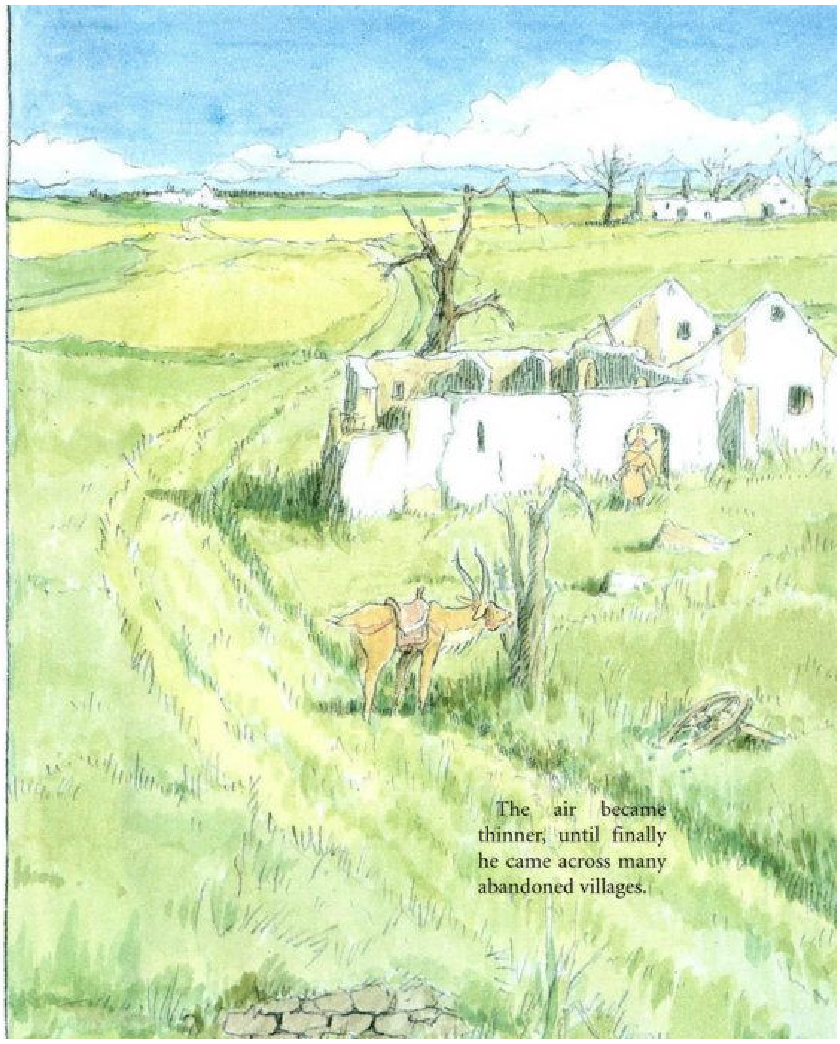

The attackers left as suddenly as they had come.


No, not so! The whimpering of a stifled voice could be heard.
The voice became fainter as it crossed the hills of sand.


The supply of food brought from the village had run out. Shuna and Yakkul were going hungry.
Time began to lose meaning. Shuna no longer knew how many months it had been since he left.
He killed to eat.
He had to use every ounce of effort just to...
stay alive.


Where on earth could the people who once lived here have gone?

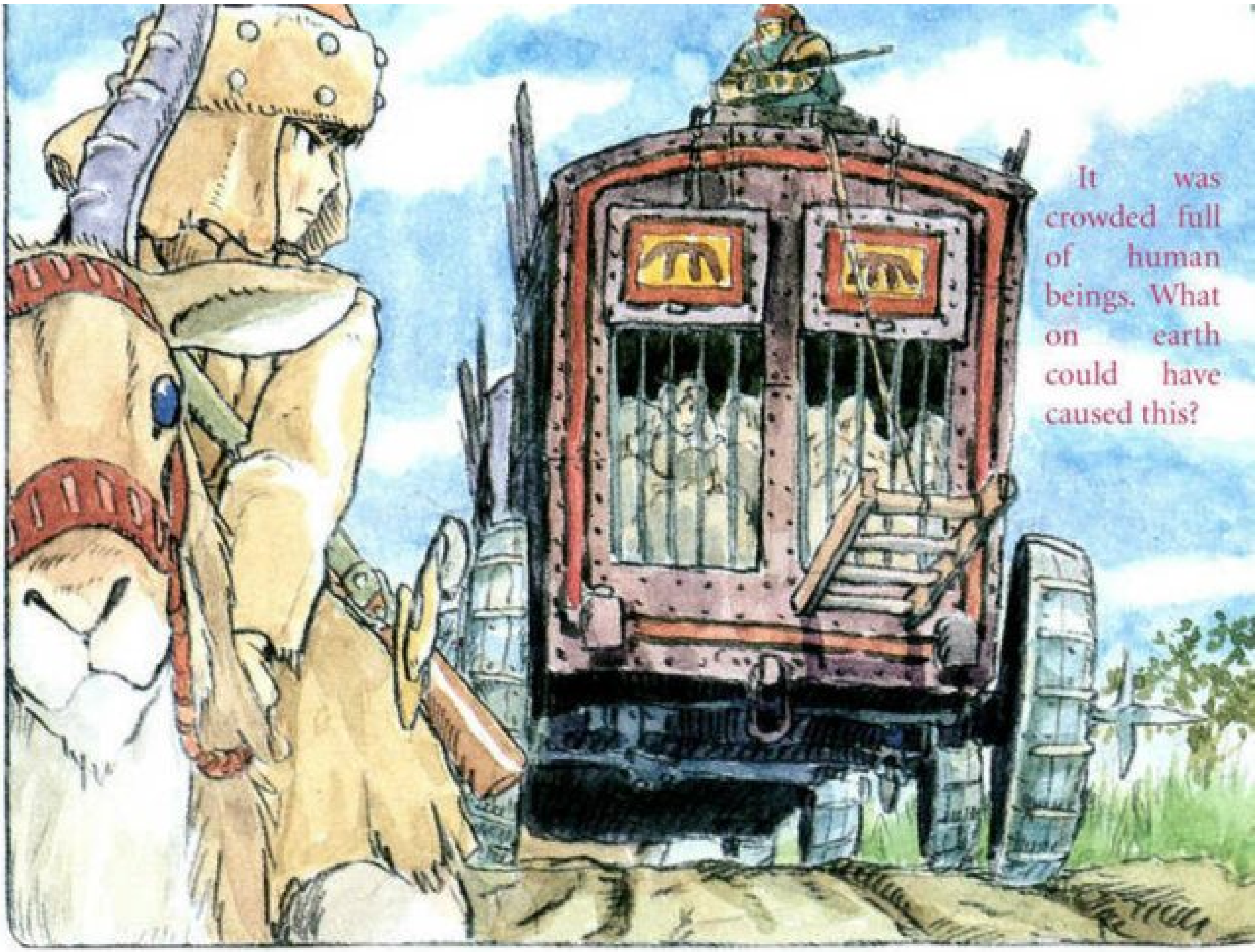

The fields had reverted back to the wild. It couldn't even support the weak Hiwabie anymore.
The seeds I am looking for are not here.


The air became thinner, until finally he came across many abandoned villages.

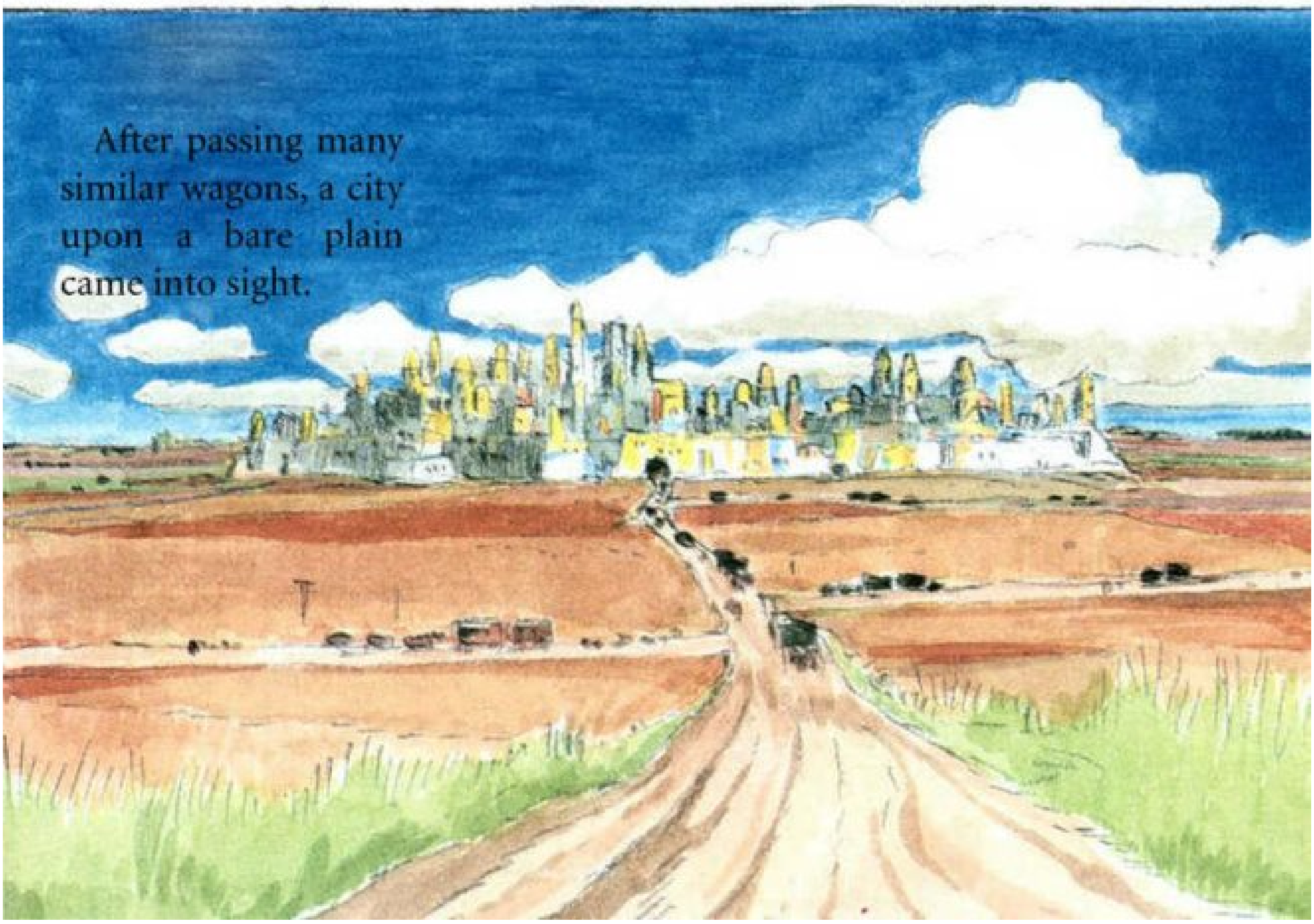
As they went even farther west, they passed by a large pack beast-driven wagon. He asked the men on it for directions, but they only sneered at Shuna's old-fashioned musket and wouldn't respond.

There was a foul smell coming from the armored wagon. Upon seeing its cargo, Shuna received a shock.

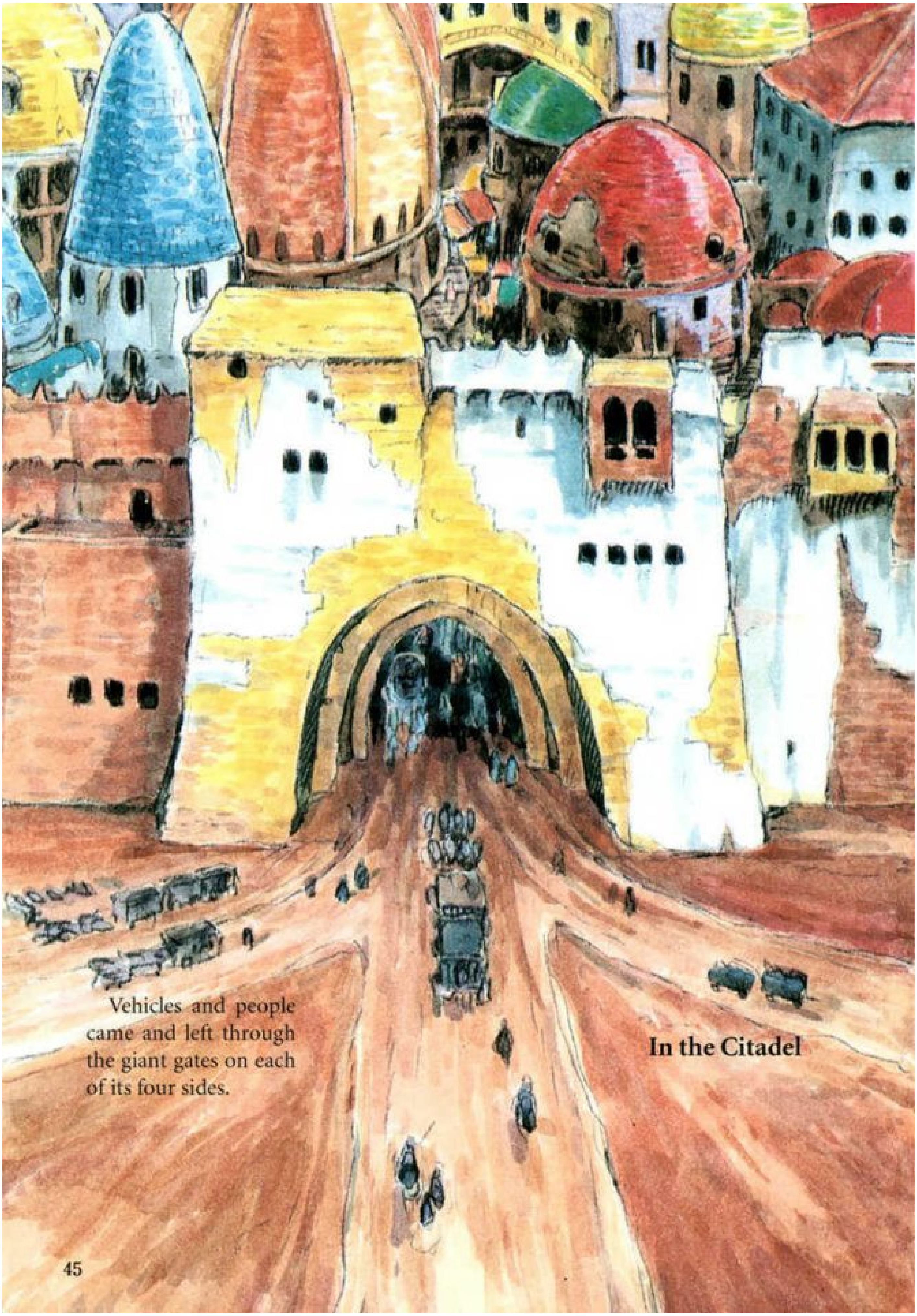




It was crowded full of human beings. What on earth could have caused this?



After passing many similar wagons, a city upon a bare plain came into sight.



Vehicles and people came and left through the giant gates on each of its four sides.

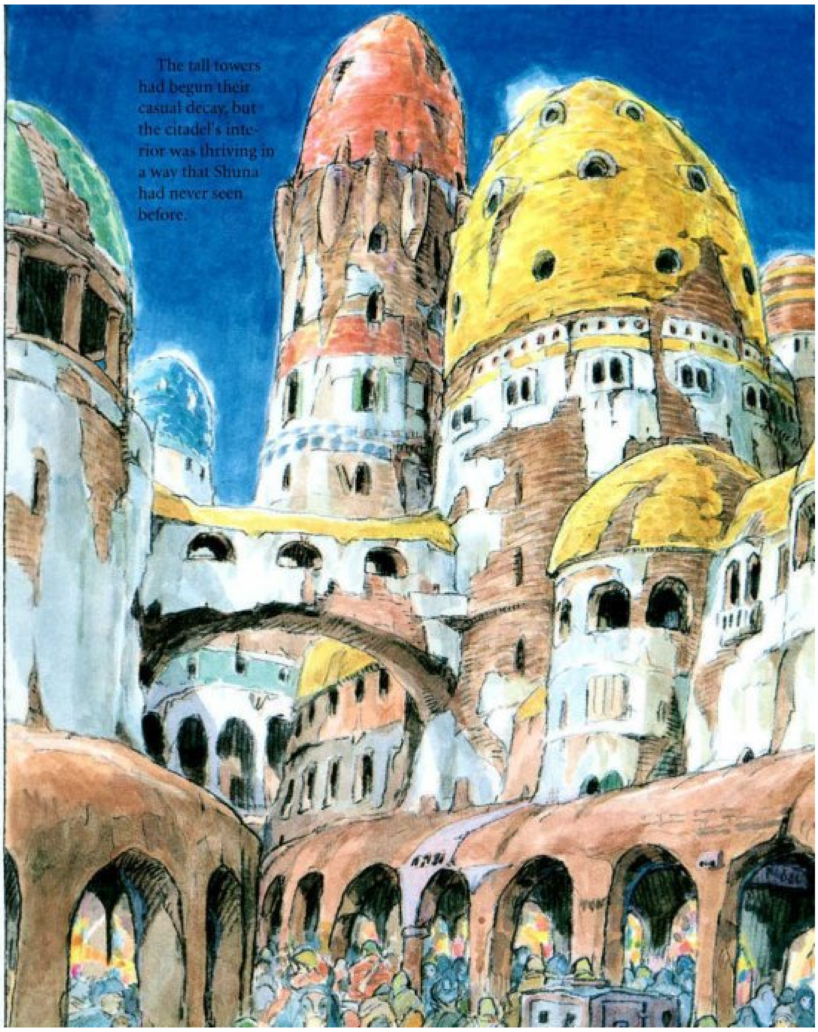
In the Citadel





How can this be...?

The goods for barter in this city... were slaves.

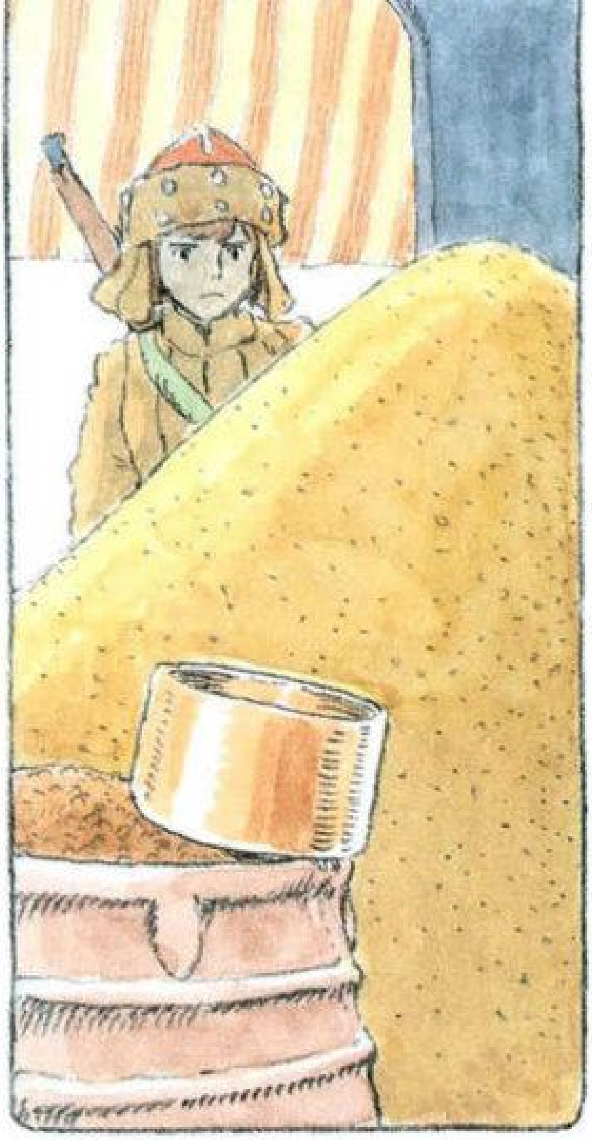


The seeds I am looking for can't possibly be in a place like this.





The merchant's behavior towards him changed abruptly as Shuna showed him his jewel-encrusted knife. Mountains of seed, bean and threshed, stood at the front of the shop.



Shuna's eyes singled out one pile. They were the seeds he was searching for! ...but they had all been threshed, and so they were all dead. Shuna asked the merchant whether he had any living seed.

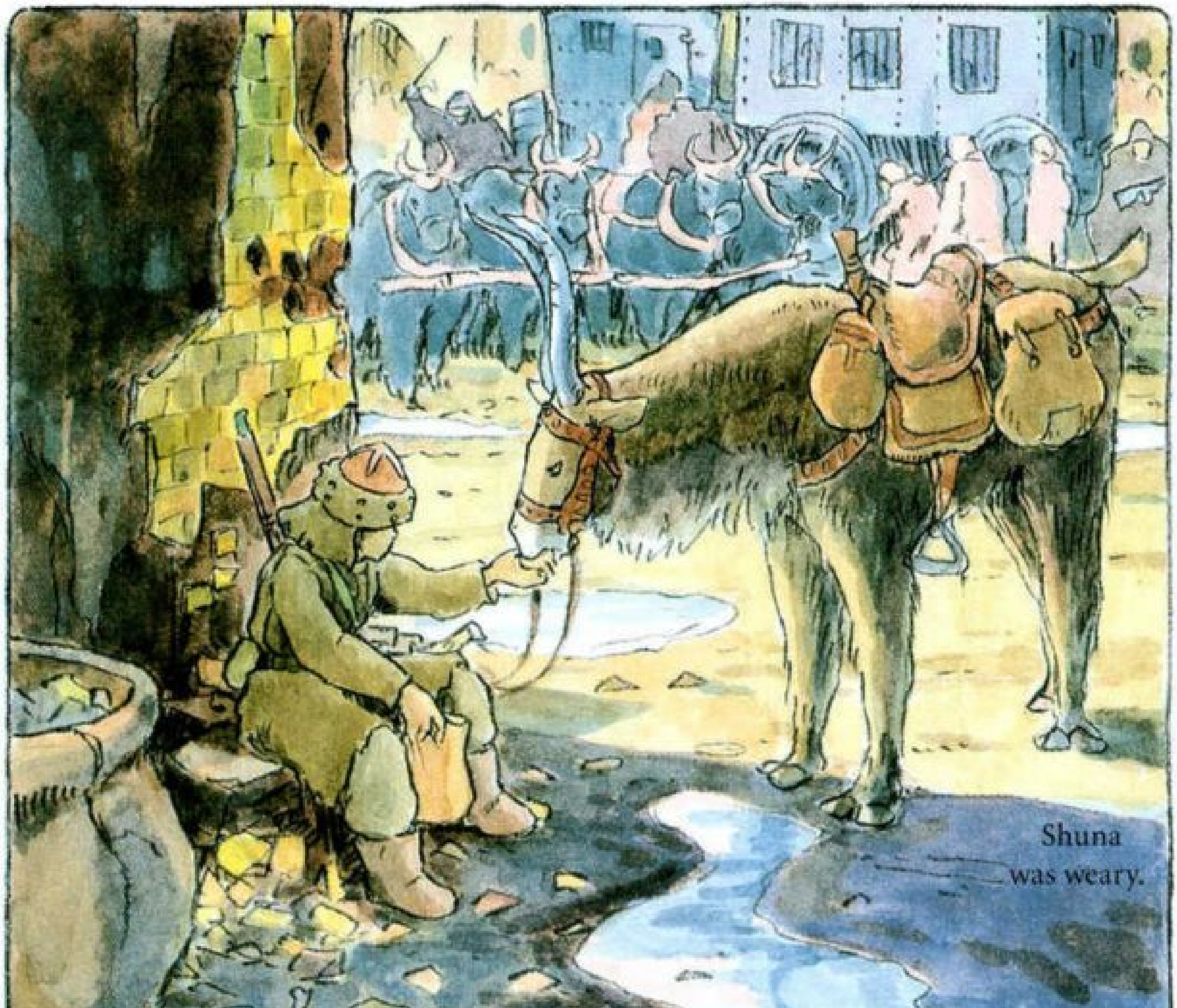
"No one is left to tend fields. We get the wheat we need from somewhere else."

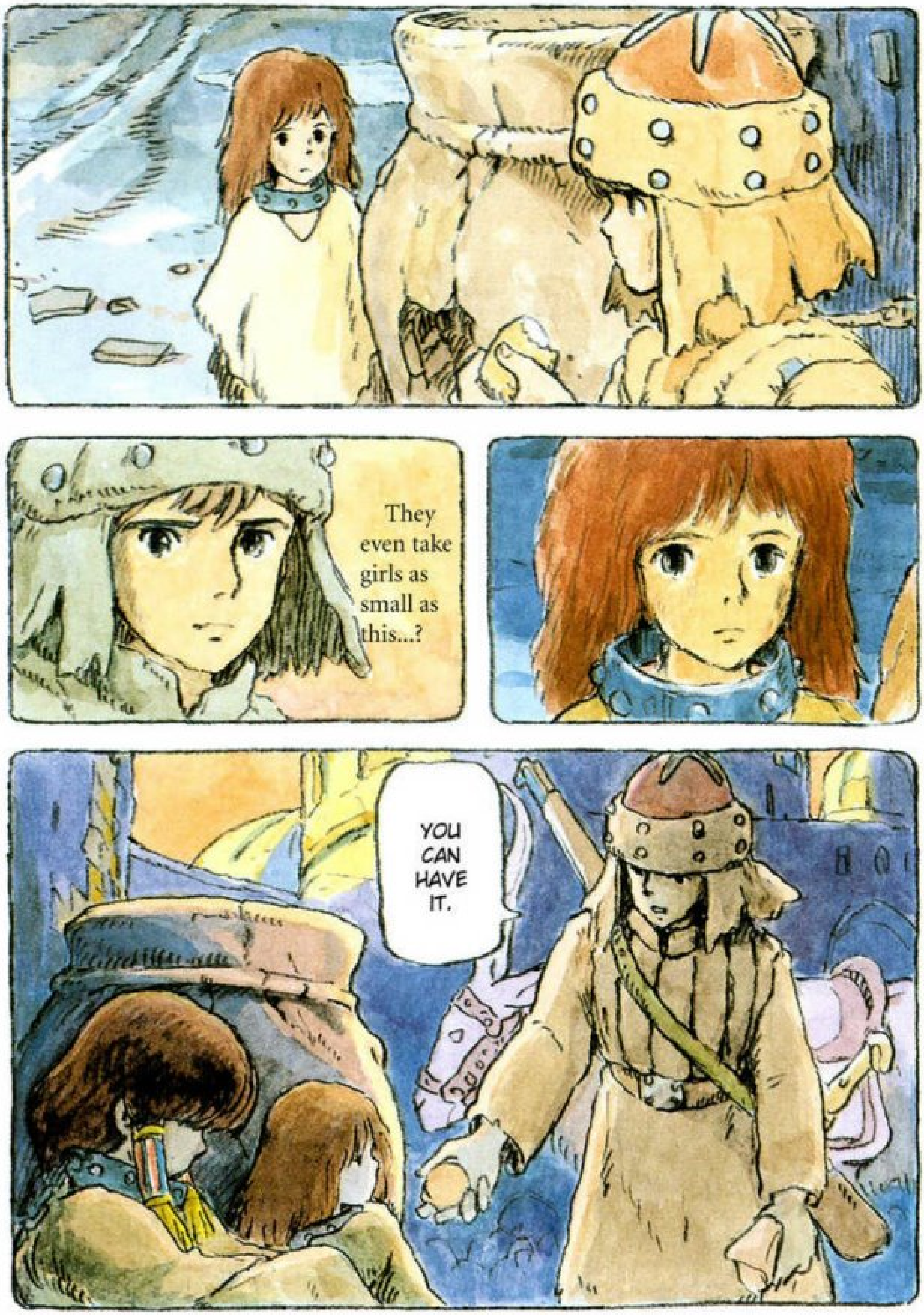
"Then can you tell me where this wheat comes from?"

"The slave dealers exchange their wares for it. Go ask them."




The men's
lips were sealed
with a steel wall
of hostility.


Shuna
was weary.
1983



They even take girls as small as this...?
YOU CAN HAVE IT.

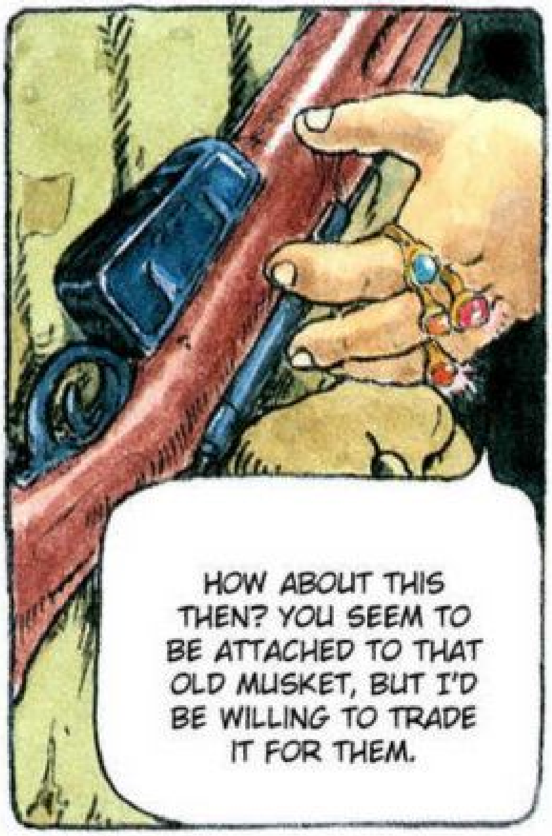

MR. TRAVELER SIR, I SEE YOU HAVE AN EYE FOR QUALITY!

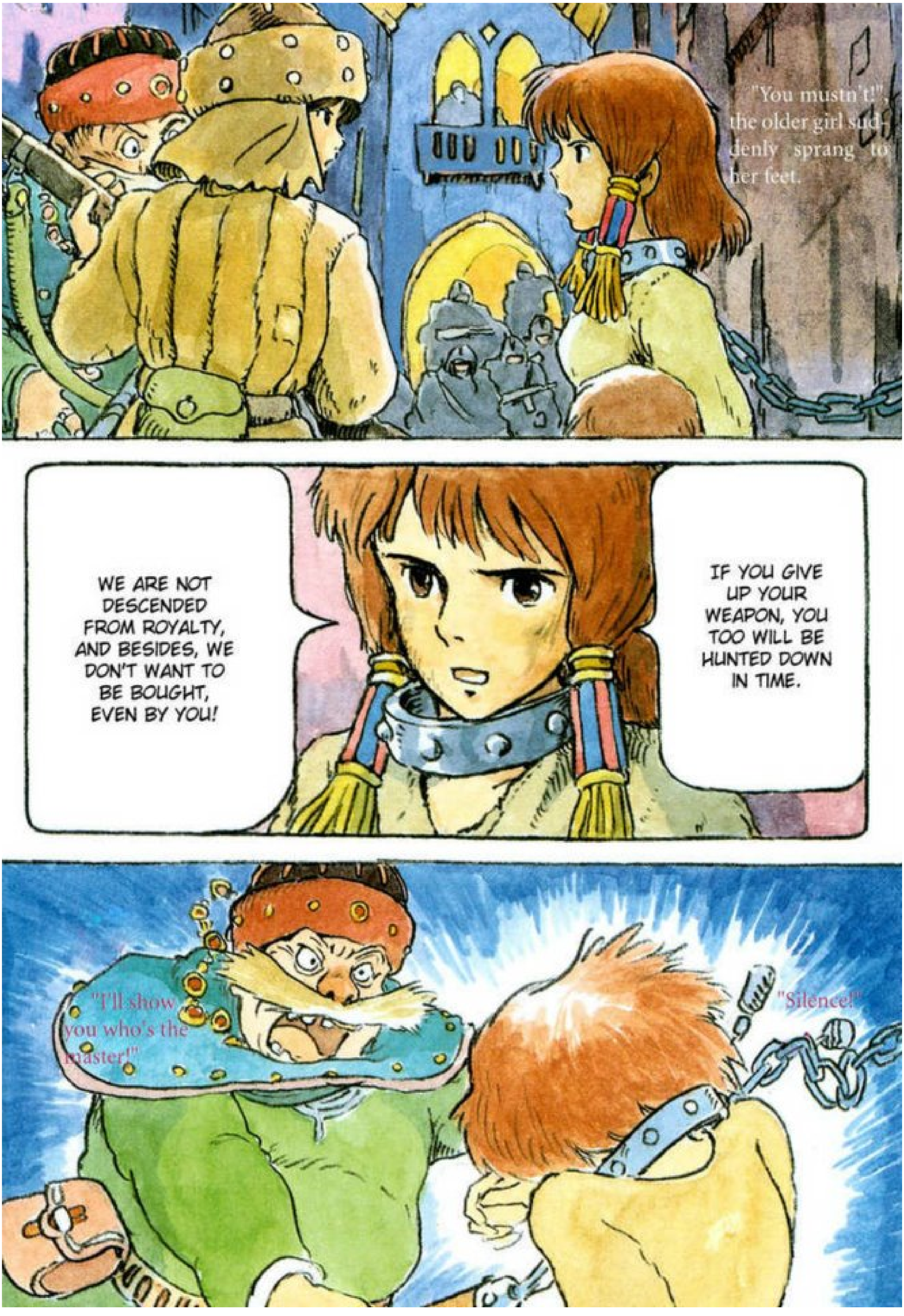


"If I could only set them free!", Shuna tormented himself.

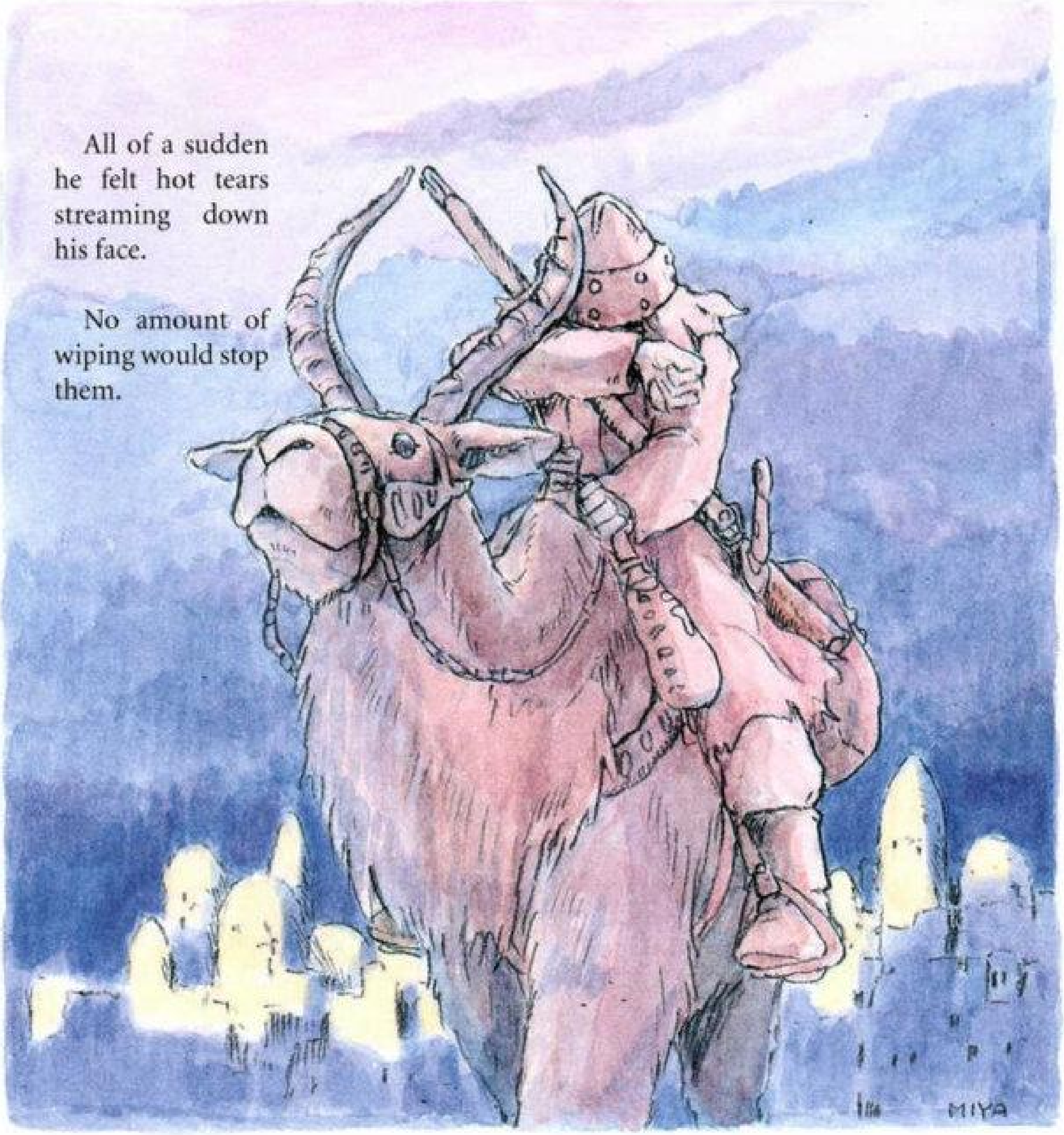
But if he let go of Yakkul, his journey would be over. He had already used up his precious stones.



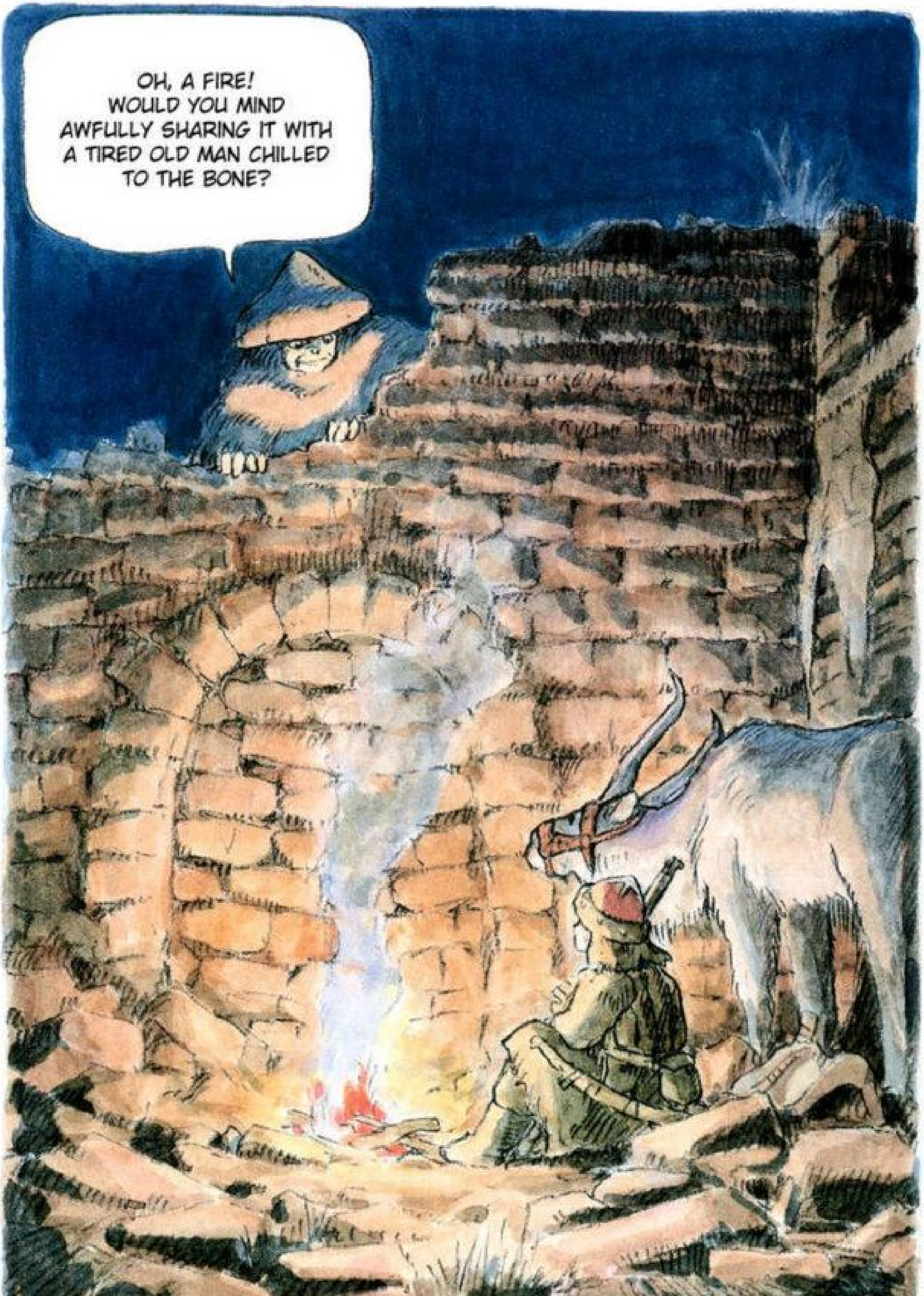



"You mustn't!", the older girl suddenly sprang to her feet.
WE ARE NOT DESCENDED FROM ROYALTY, AND BESIDES, WE DON'T WANT TO BE BOUGHT, EVEN BY YOU!
IF YOU GIVE UP YOUR WEAPON, YOU TOO WILL BE HUNTED DOWN IN TIME.
"I'll show you who's the master!"
"Silence!"

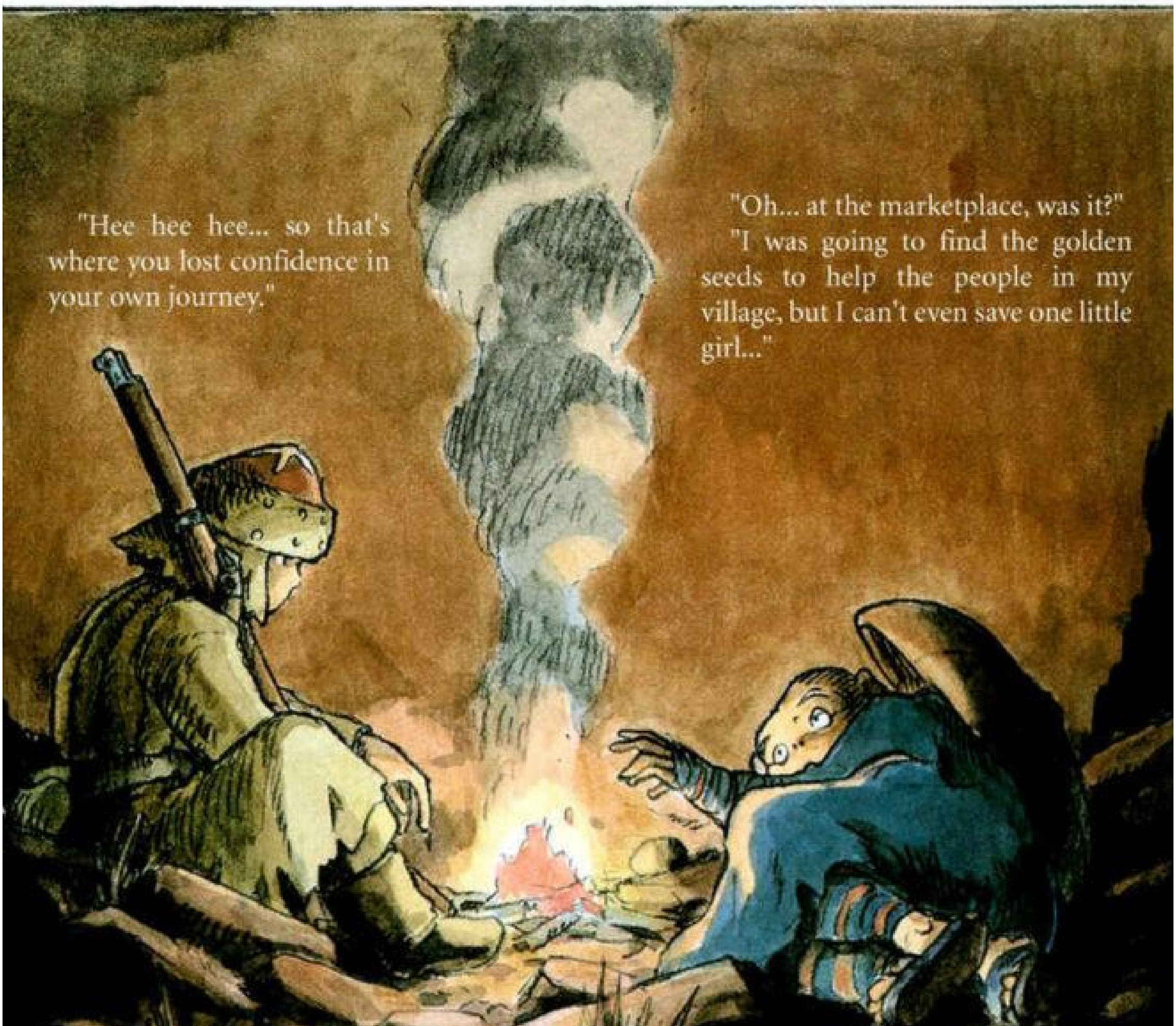

STAY THERE AND DON'T MAKE A FUSS, UNLESS YOU HAVE A DEATHWISH.
As Shuna tried to stop him, he was surrounded by patrol-men.
OFF WITH YOU THEN, YOU UNCOUTH RASCAL, OR WOULD YOU RATHER I DEMON-STRATE TO YOU HOW PRETTILY SHE CAN SCREAM?
Shuna was forced to leave.


All of a sudden he felt hot tears streaming down his face.
No amount of wiping would stop them.
MIYA




OH, A FIRE! WOULD YOU MIND AWFULLY SHARING IT WITH A TIRED OLD MAN CHILLED TO THE BONE?


GOOD LUCK COMES TO THOSE WHO ARE KIND TO THE ELDERLY. SO, SO... TROUBLE IS COMING, IS IT? HM? HEE HEE HEE...!


"Oh... at the marketplace, was it?"
"I was going to find the golden seeds to help the people in my village, but I can't even save one little girl..."
"Hee hee hee... so that's where you lost confidence in your own journey."


THEN YOU SHOULD SIMPLY TURN AROUND AND RETURN TO YOUR HOMELAND RIGHT NOW, BACK TO A LIFE WHERE YOU ARE PAMPERED LIKE A PRINCE...
GIVE UP ON YOUR SILLY YELLOW SEEDS.
OUCH ...
"Do you know where the golden seeds might be, old man?"
"I can't say I don't."
"Then please tell me. I will go there best I can."
"Hee hee hee... another trouble for your list then..."

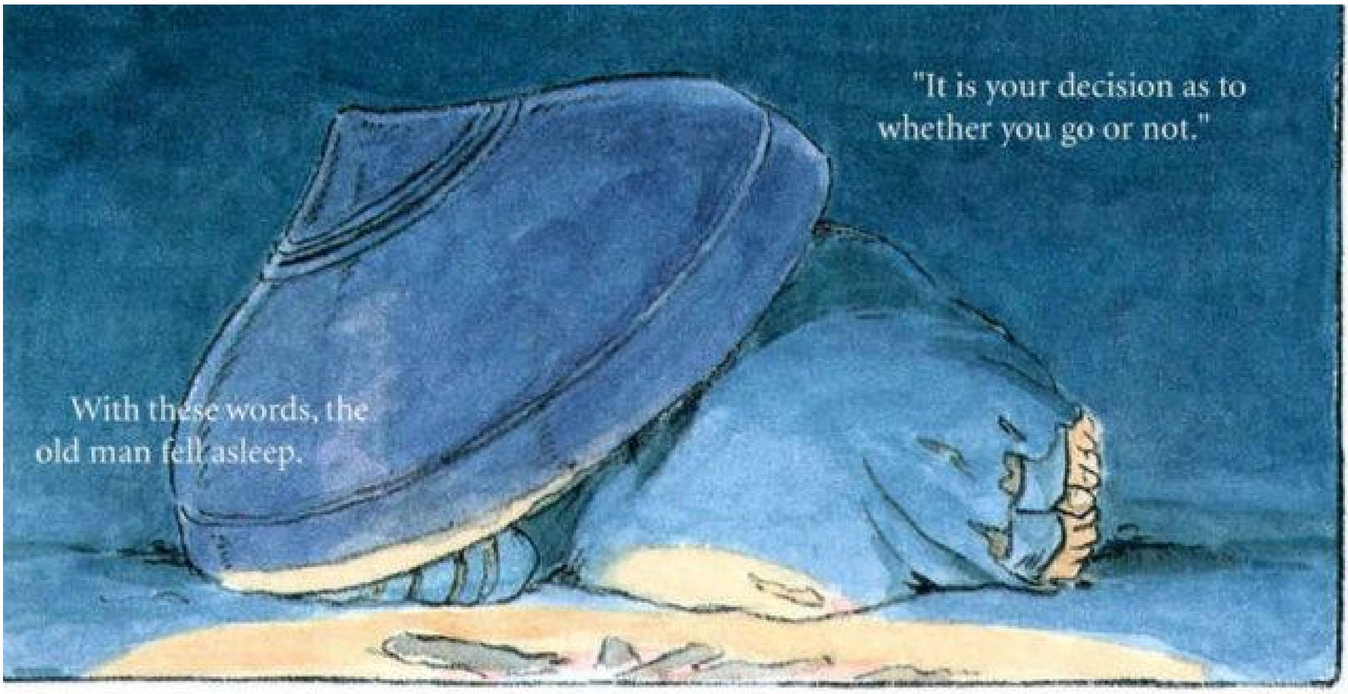


"Go farther west. The land will eventually end in a precipice. Beyond that lies the place of the god men, where the moon is born and returns to die."

"God men?"

"Once, man had the golden seeds. It was something that man harvested, sewed, and brought to life, but now only the god men have it. Now, man sells out fellow man to the god men for dead seed."

"The god men don't welcome the presence of man. No-one that has ever gone to their land has returned."

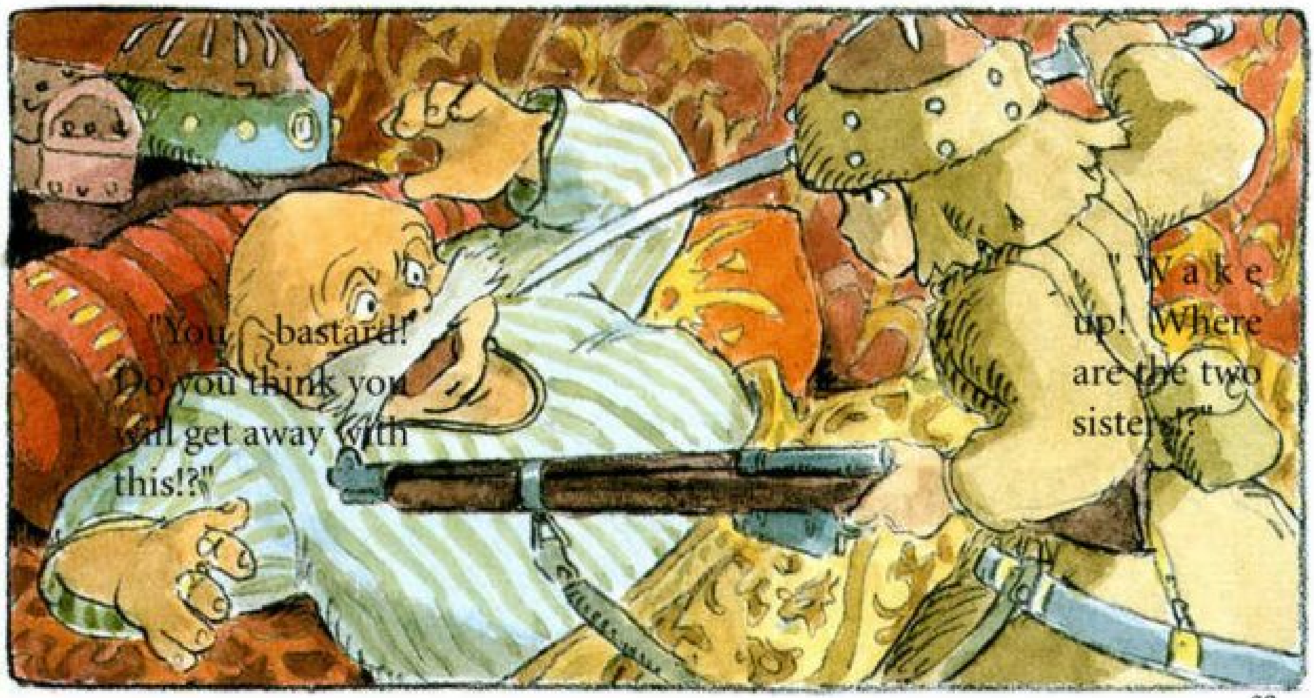

"It is your decision as to whether you go or not."
With these words, the old man fell asleep.

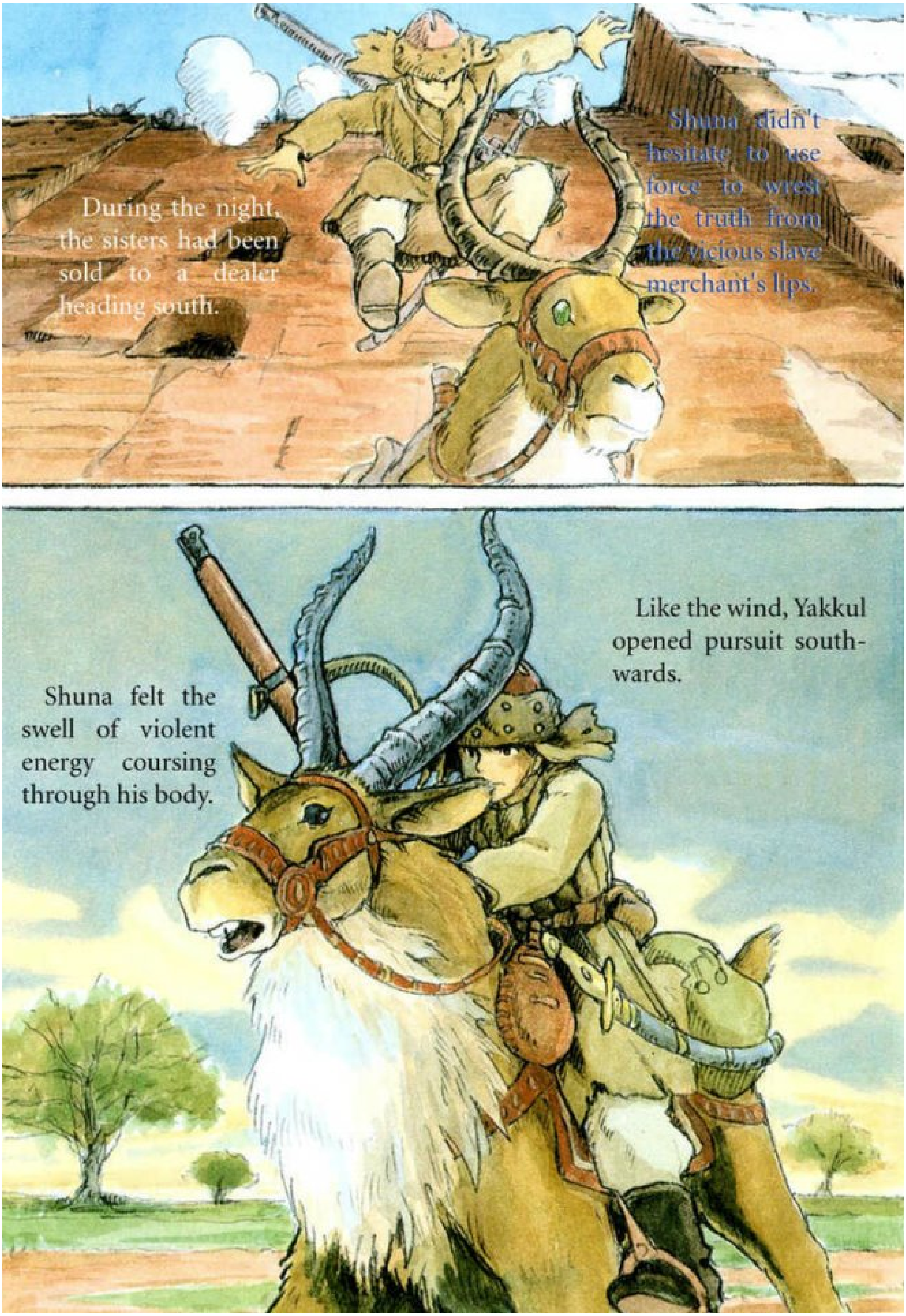

Dawn approached. When Shuna awoke, the old man was nowhere to be seen. Shuna set out, first to the east...

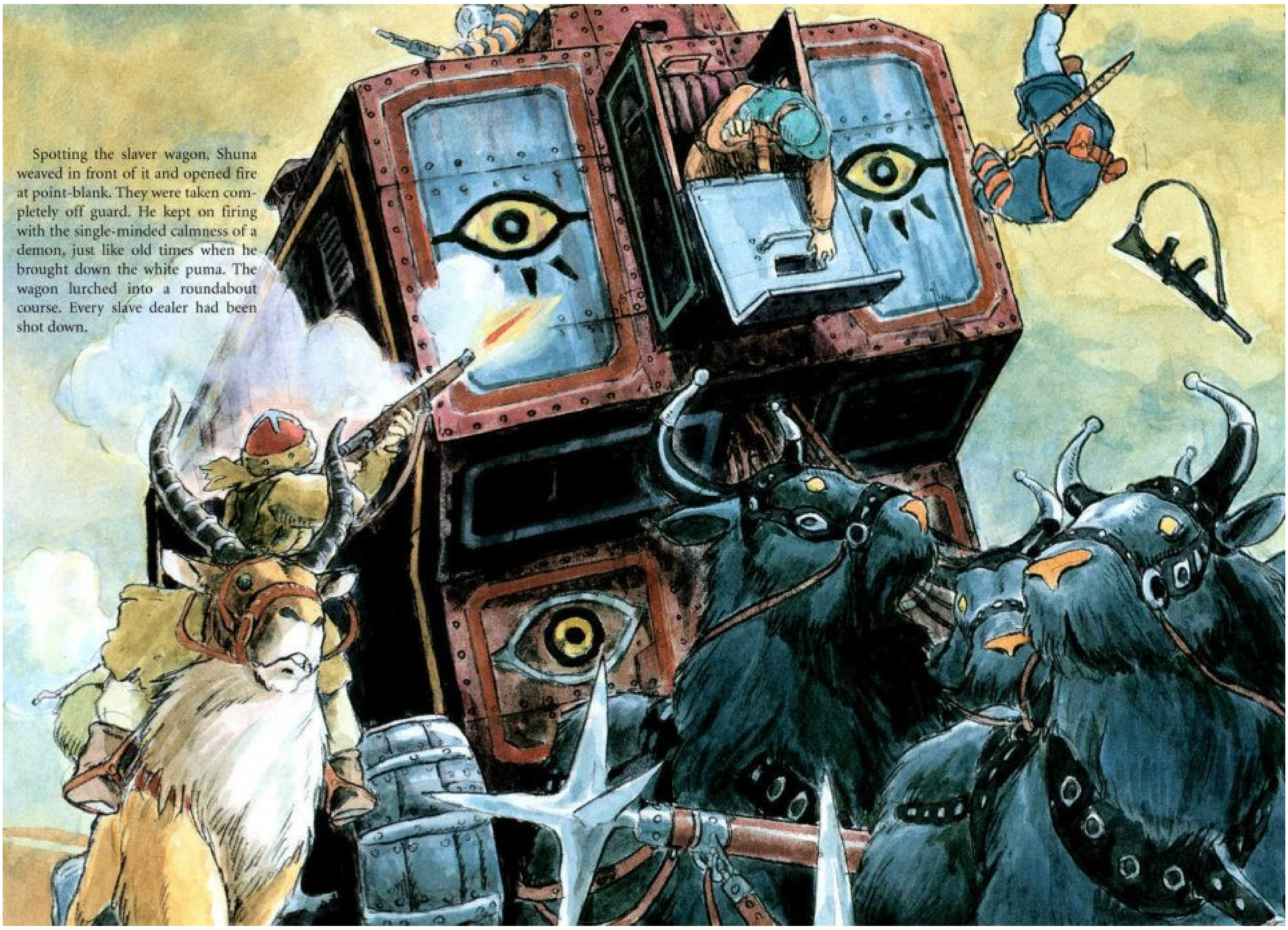
Shuna retraced his steps to the citadel - fat with sleep - securely inside of its thick bolted gates. He scaled the walls and returned to the street he had been in the day before, but the only things he found were the chains still fastened to the wall. The sisters were gone.



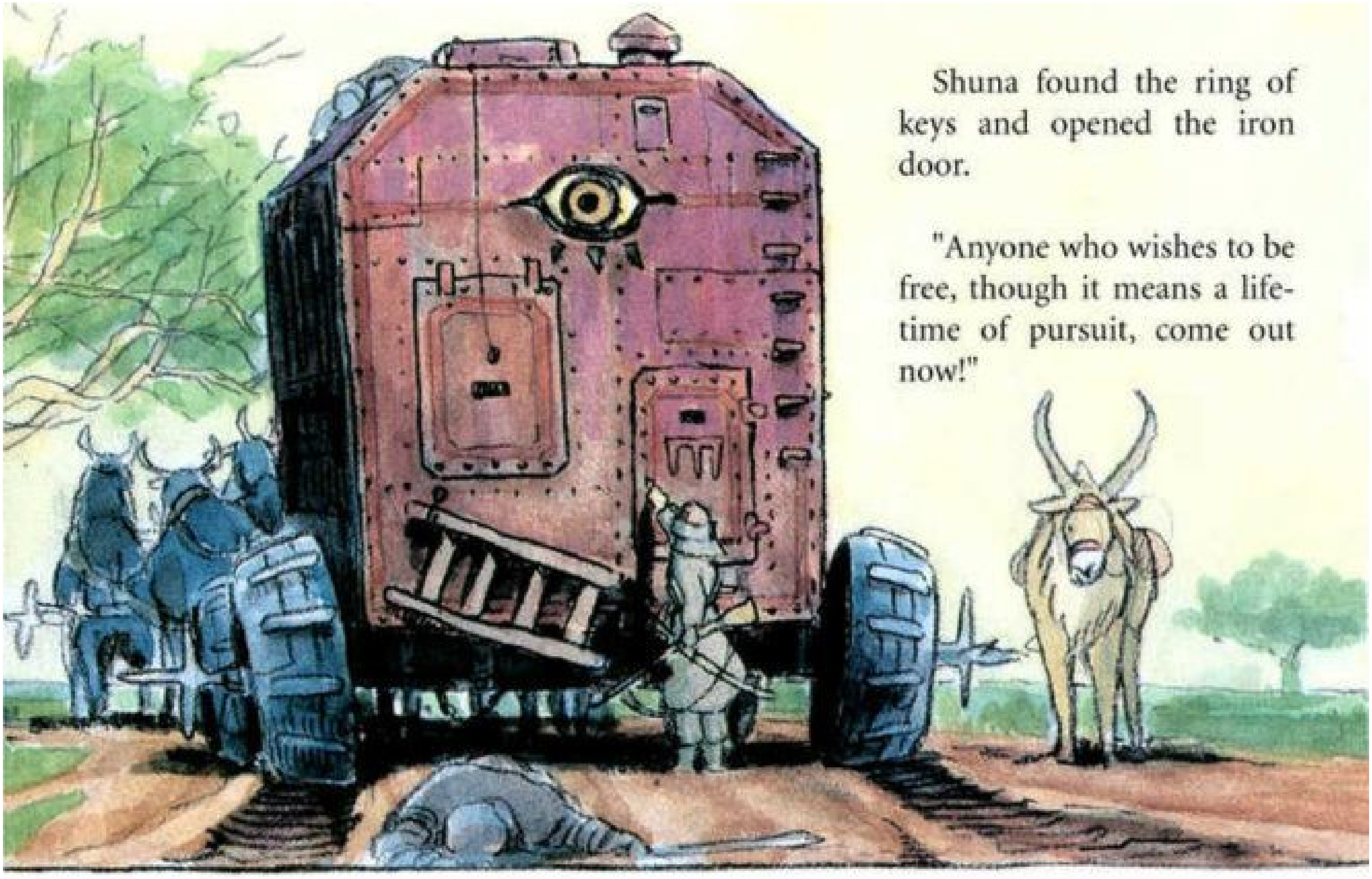





During the night, the sisters had been sold to a dealer heading south.
Shuna didn't hesitate to use force to wrest the truth from the vicious slave merchant's lips.
Like the wind, Yakkul opened pursuit southwards.
Shuna felt the swell of violent energy coursing through his body.

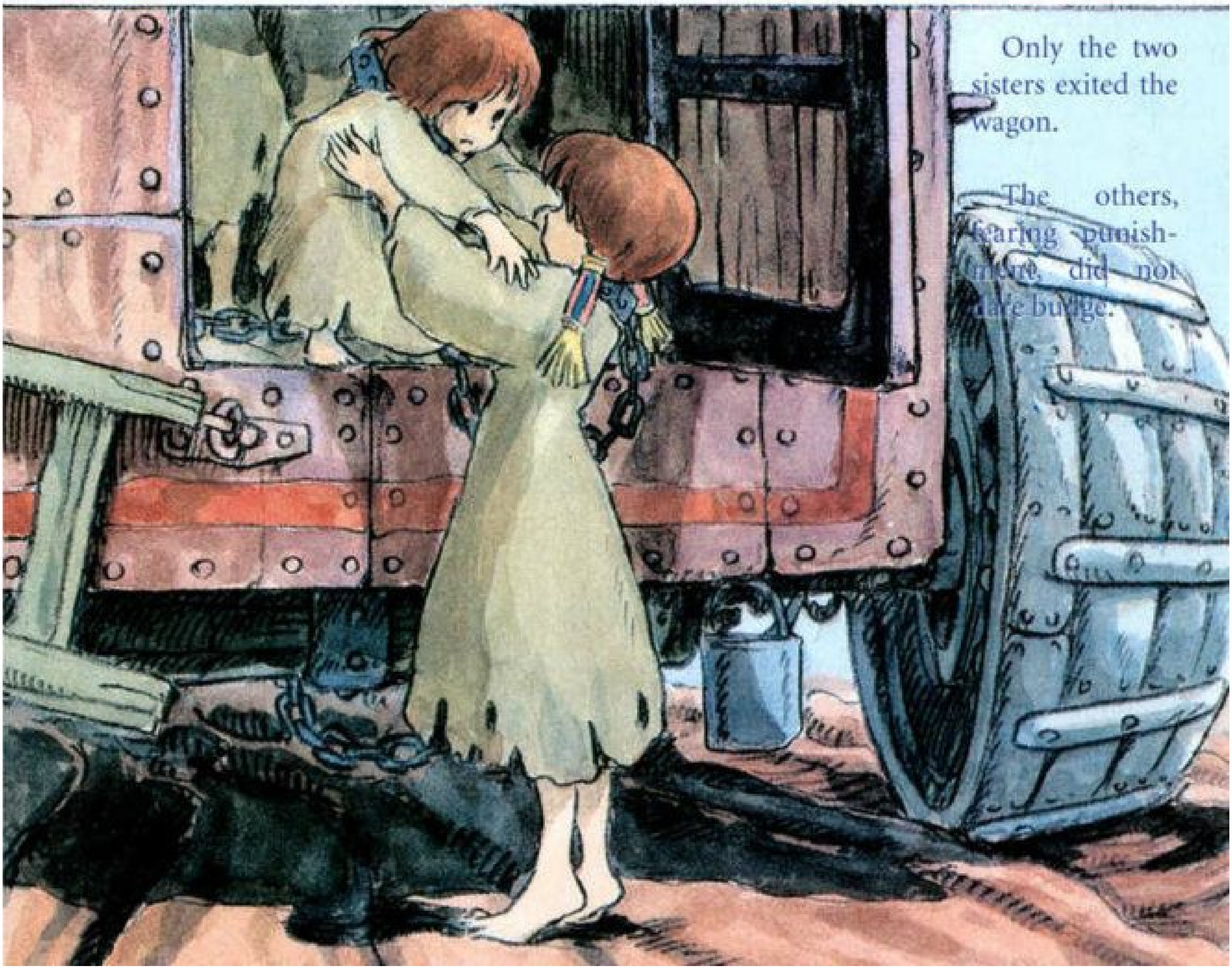


Spotting the slaver wagon, Shuna weaved in front of it and opened fire at point-blank. They were taken completely off guard. He kept on firing with the single-minded calmness of a demon, just like old times when he brought down the white puma. The wagon lurched into a roundabout course. Every slave dealer had been shot down.



Shuna found the ring of keys and opened the iron door.

"Anyone who wishes to be free, though it means a lifetime of pursuit, come out now!"

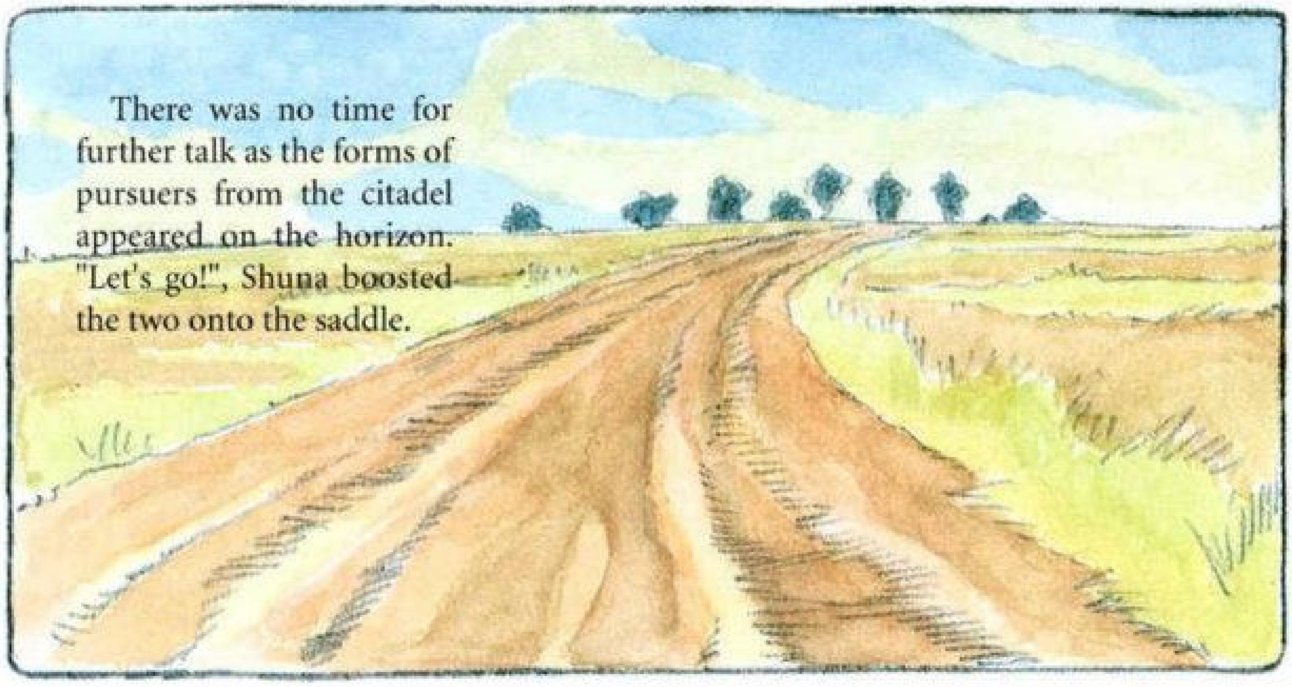


Only the two sisters exited the wagon.

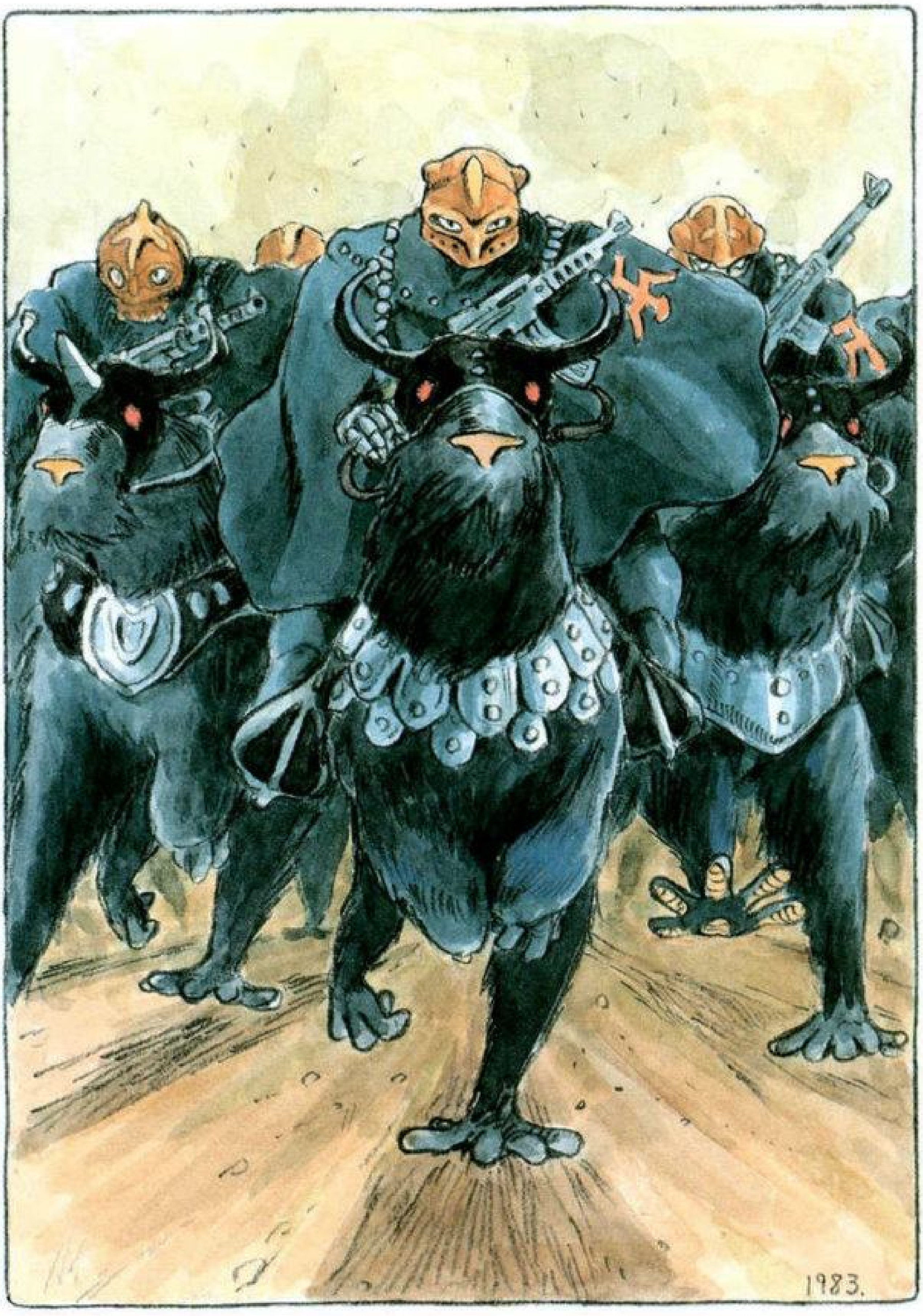
The others, fearing punishment, did not dare budge.

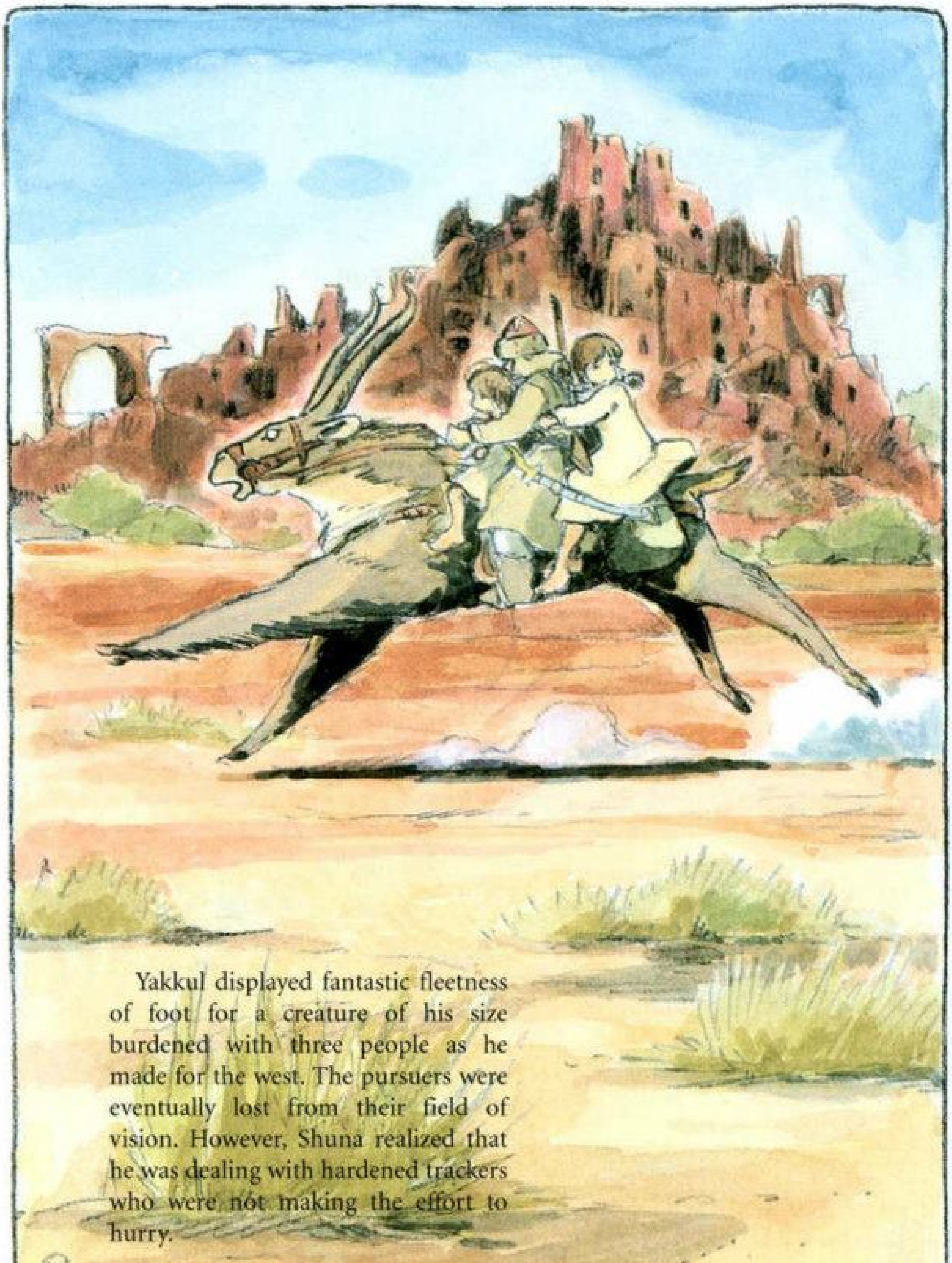
"You shunned against having your freedom bought for you. You fought proudly for your freedom, and now you are free!"



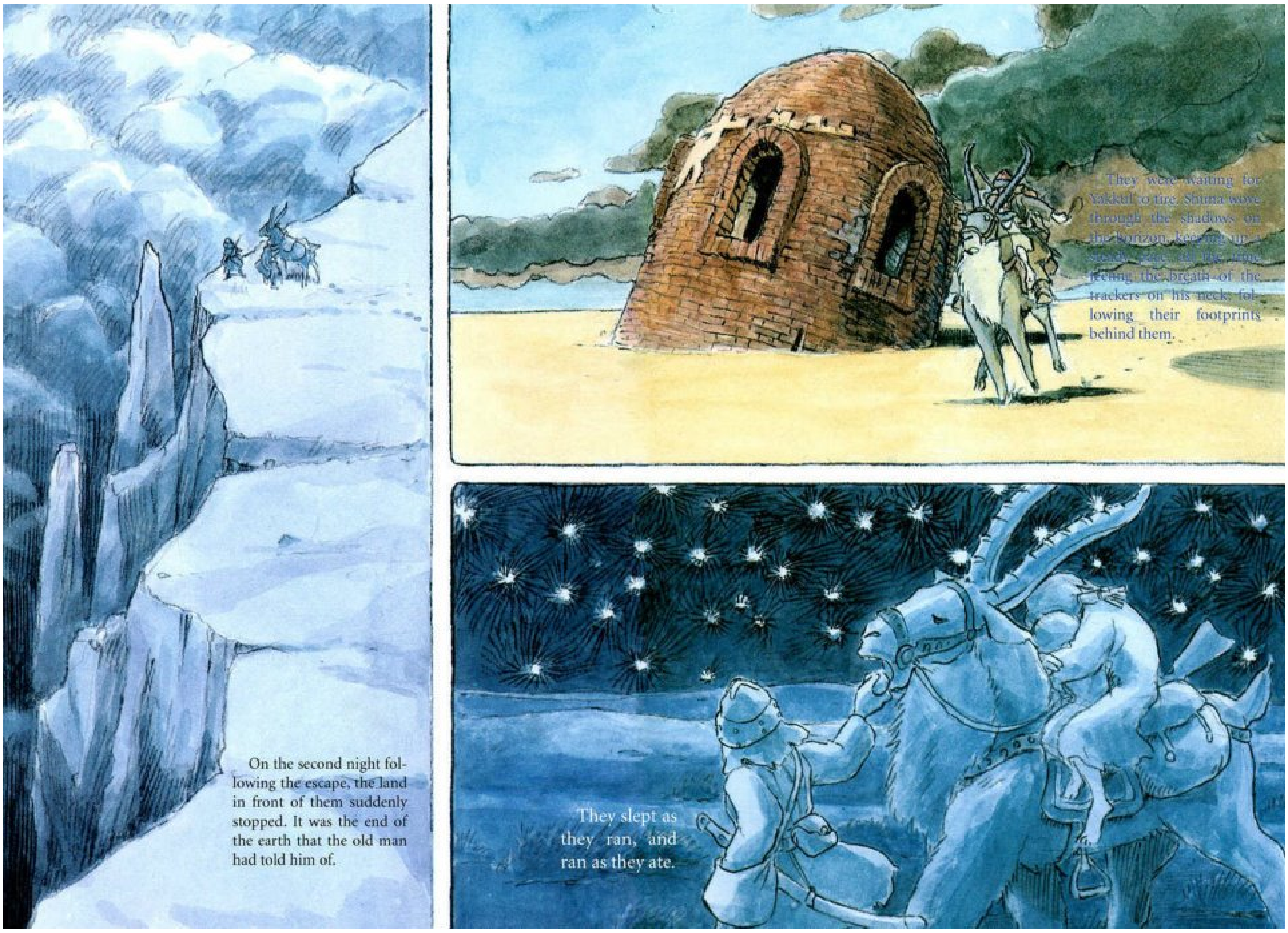


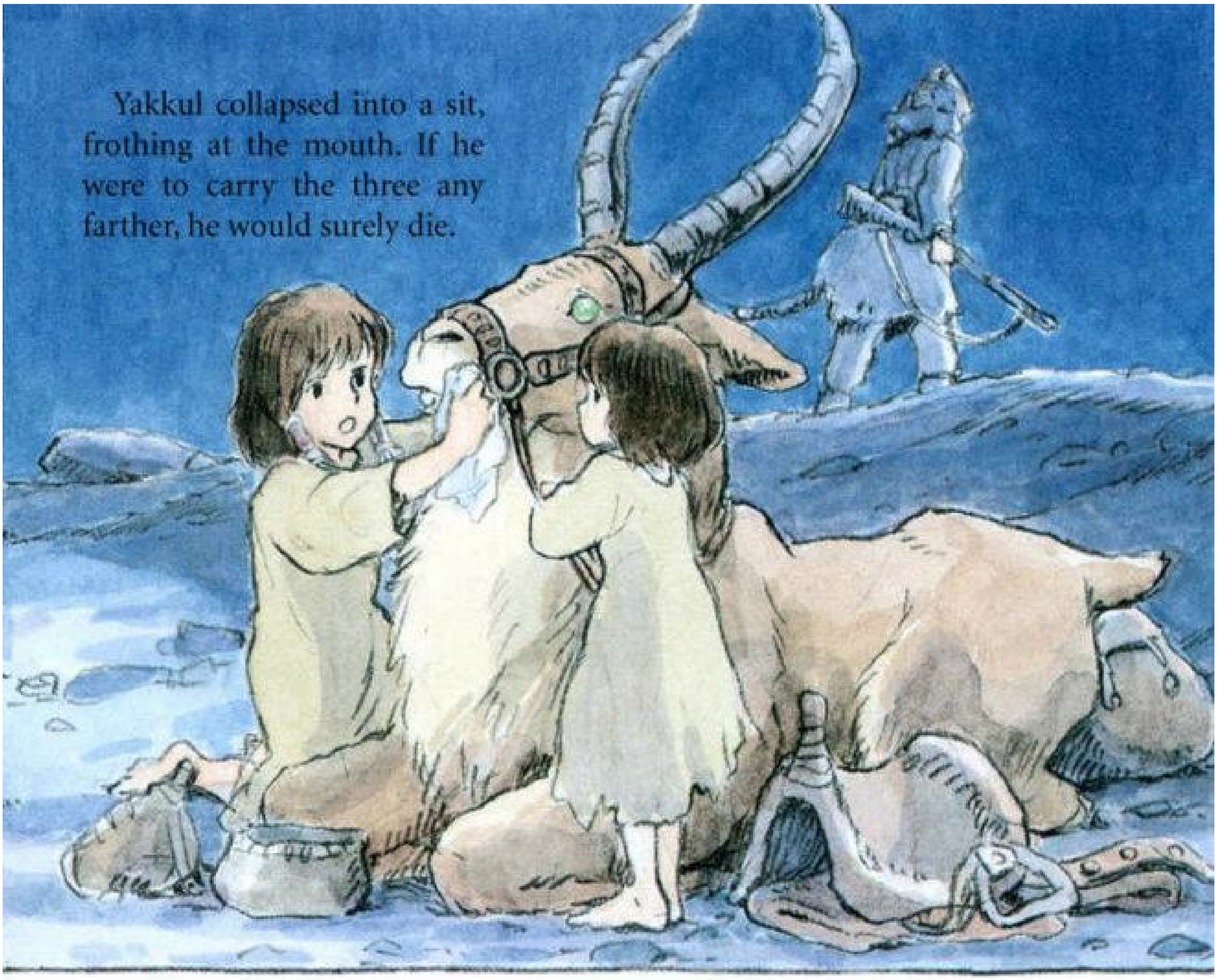
There was no time for further talk as the forms of pursuers from the citadel appeared on the horizon. "Let's go!", Shuna boosted the two onto the saddle.


1983.



Yakkul displayed fantastic fleetness of foot for a creature of his size burdened with three people as he made for the west. The pursuers were eventually lost from their field of vision. However, Shuna realized that he was dealing with hardened trackers who were not making the effort to hurry.

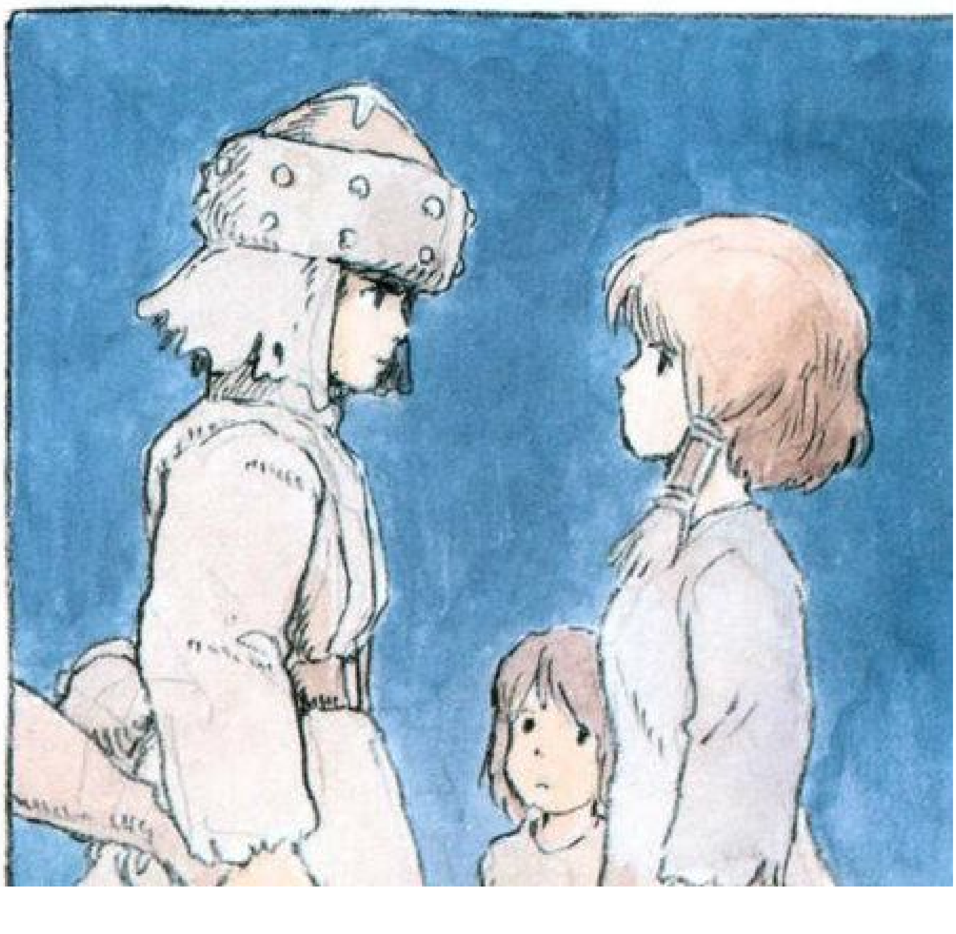

On the second night following the escape, the land in front of them suddenly stopped. It was the end of the earth that the old man had told him of.
They were waiting for Yakkul to tire. Shuna wove through the shadows on the horizon, keeping up a steady pace, all the time feeling the breath of the trackers on his neck, following their footprints behind them.
They slept as they ran, and ran as they ate.



Yakkul collapsed into a sit, frothing at the mouth. If he were to carry the three any farther, he would surely die.

"Yakkul can still run with just the two of you. I will stay here to hold them off."

When the girl protested that they must stay too, Shuna insisted, "Once I've taken care of the trackers, I plan to head straight to the land of the god men."



Knowing the reason for his journey, the girl cast her eyes to the ground. She finally lifted her gaze, "If you return from there, please keep heading north. We will be waiting for you there, always."

The girl's name, she finally confessed, was Thea. Shuna gave her half of his food and water.

The time had come for him to take his leave. Thea and her tiny little sister stopped and waved once, and then vanished swiftly into the north without another backward's glance.





Shuna started setting up goat traps he had learned at his village. He constructed several small mountains from small stones at the very edge of the precipice, setting gun cartridges within them,

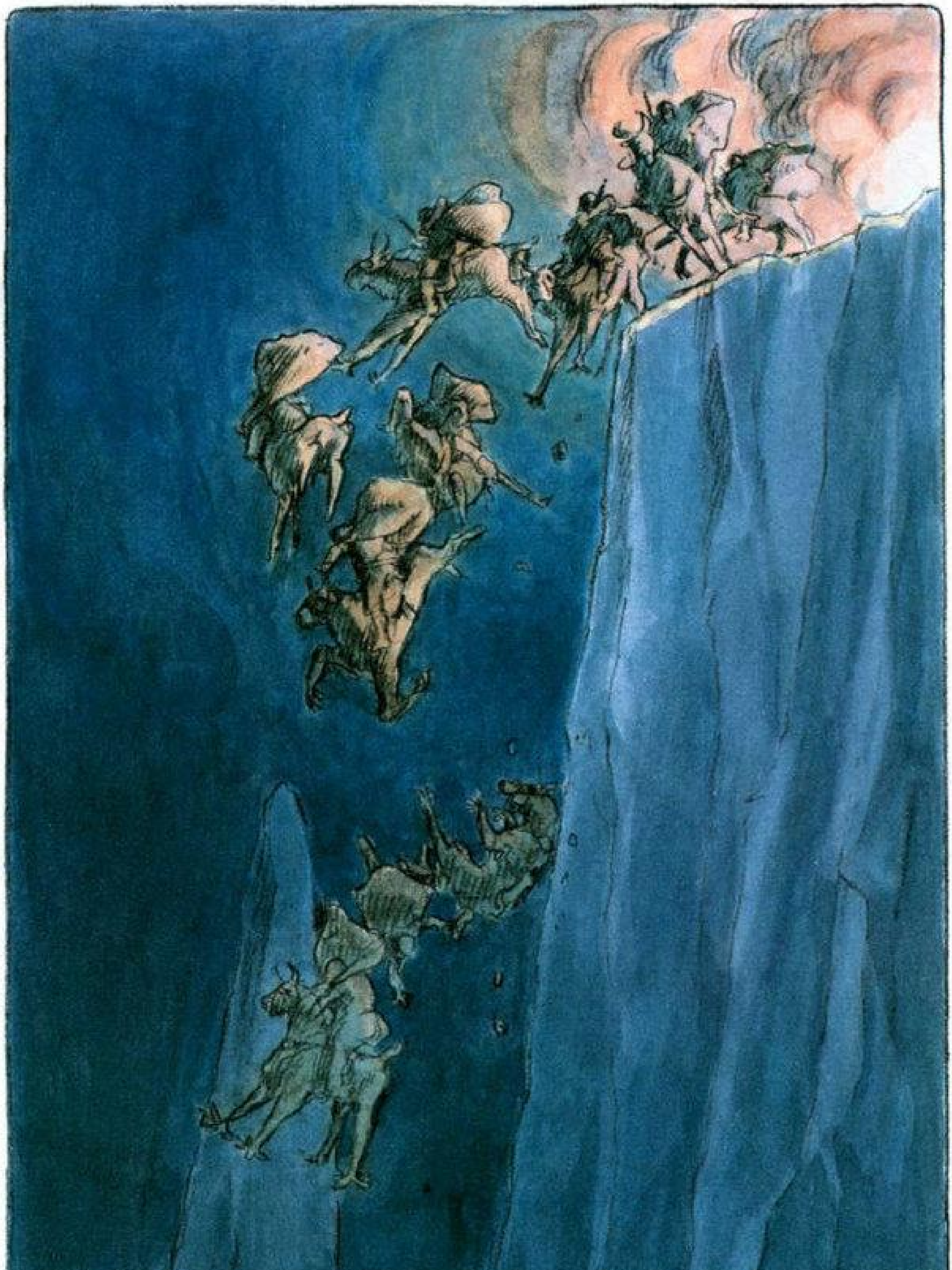
and then dug out a place for himself in the sand to hide, and silently waited.



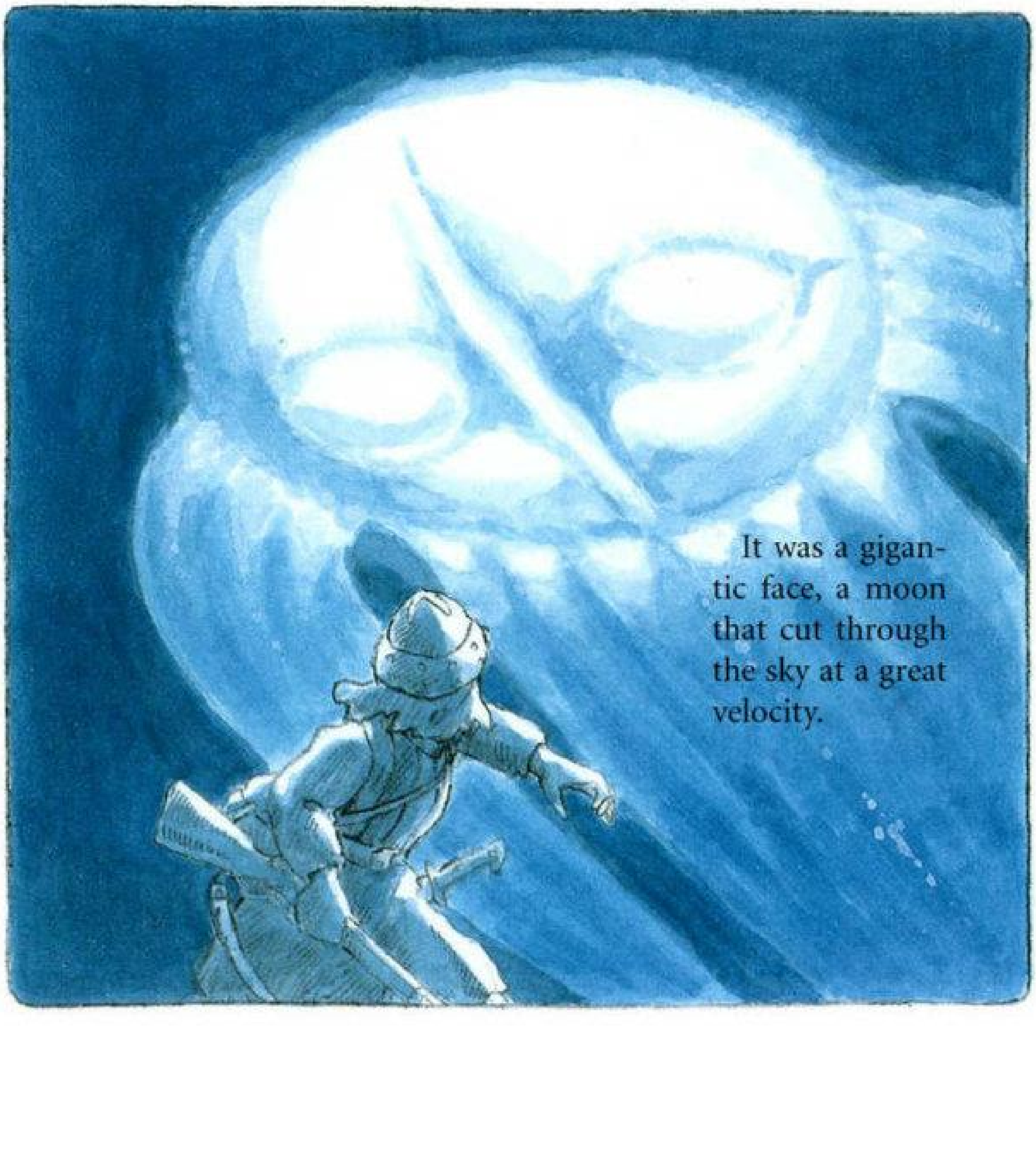


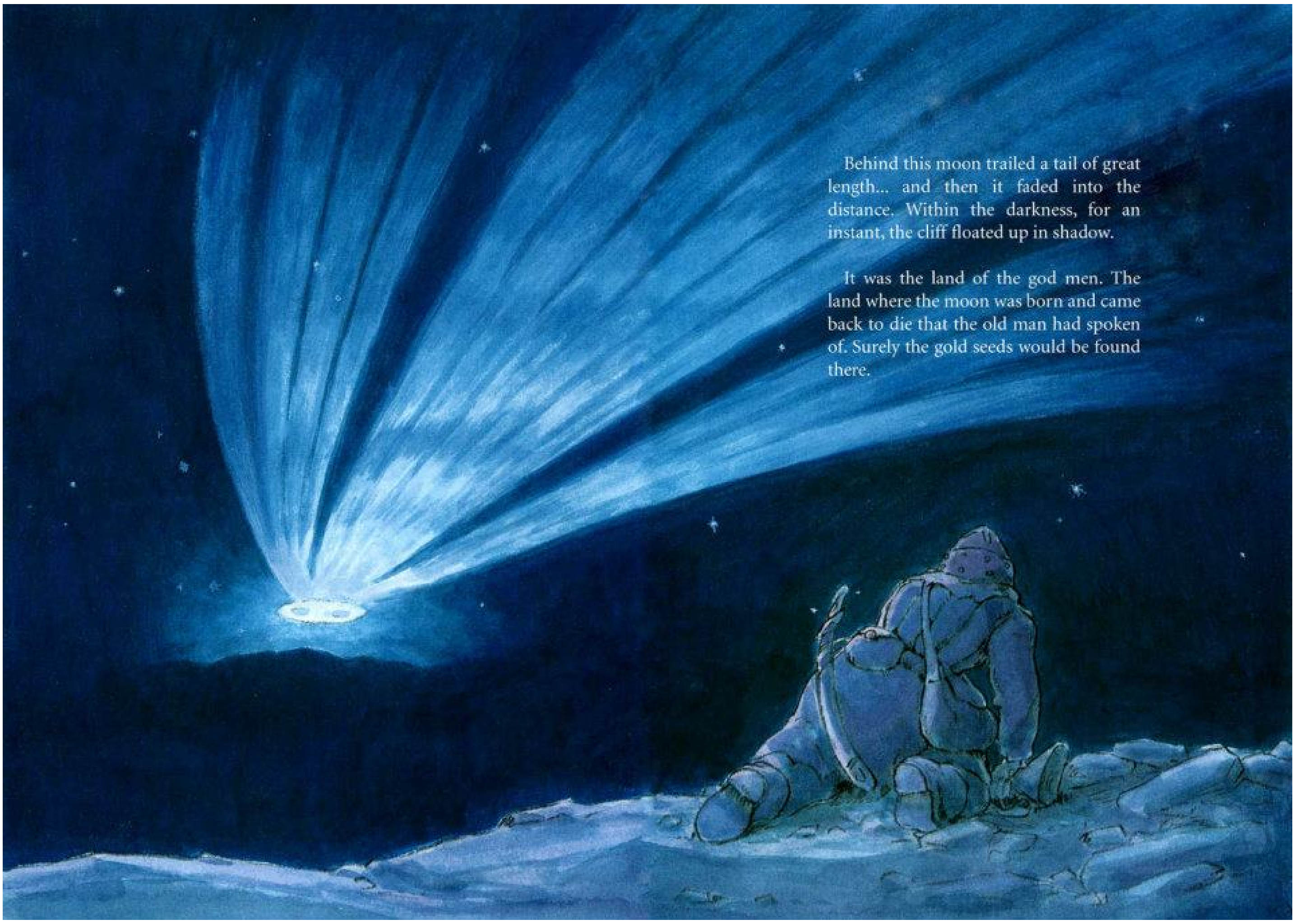

As the last pursuer entered the trap area, Shuna quickly raised himself.

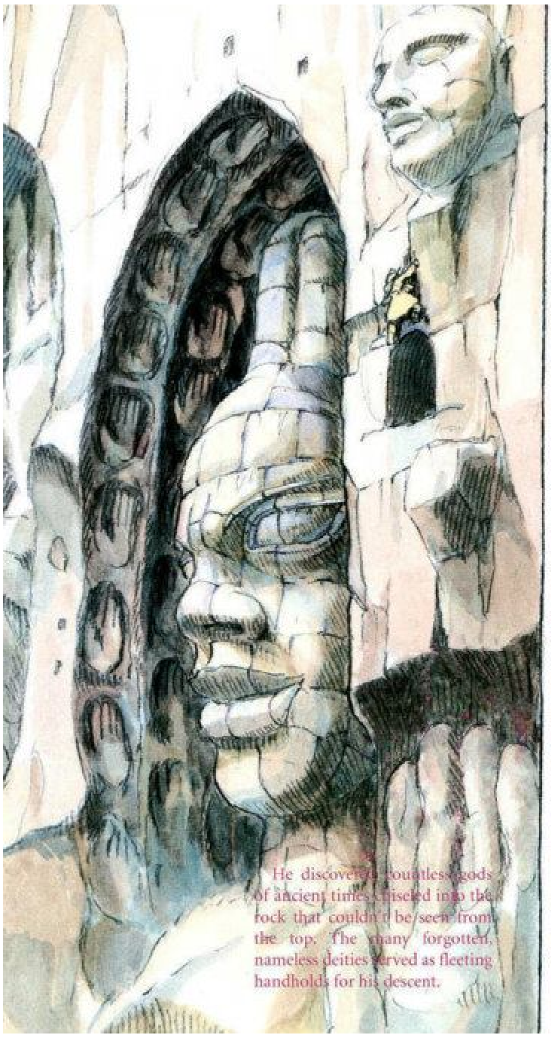

His bullets went true into each of the cartridges one after the next. The trap went off with a deafening roar and blinding flashes. The beasts shied, running over the lip of the precipice in their panic.


1983.

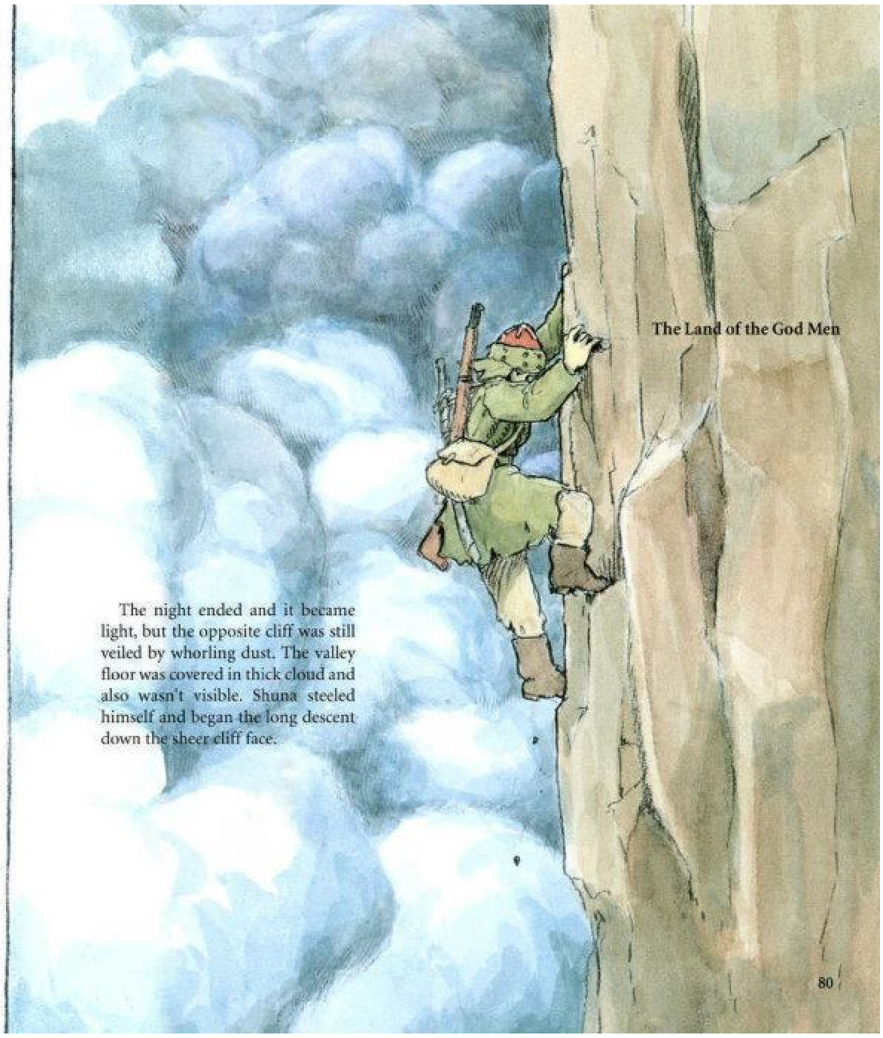

That was when it happened. A pale glow like that of a hundred moons in one, enveloped Shuna.


It was a gigantic face, a moon that cut through the sky at a great velocity.


Behind this moon trailed a tail of great length... and then it faded into the distance. Within the darkness, for an instant, the cliff floated up in shadow.
It was the land of the god men. The land where the moon was born and came back to die that the old man had spoken of. Surely the gold seeds would be found there.

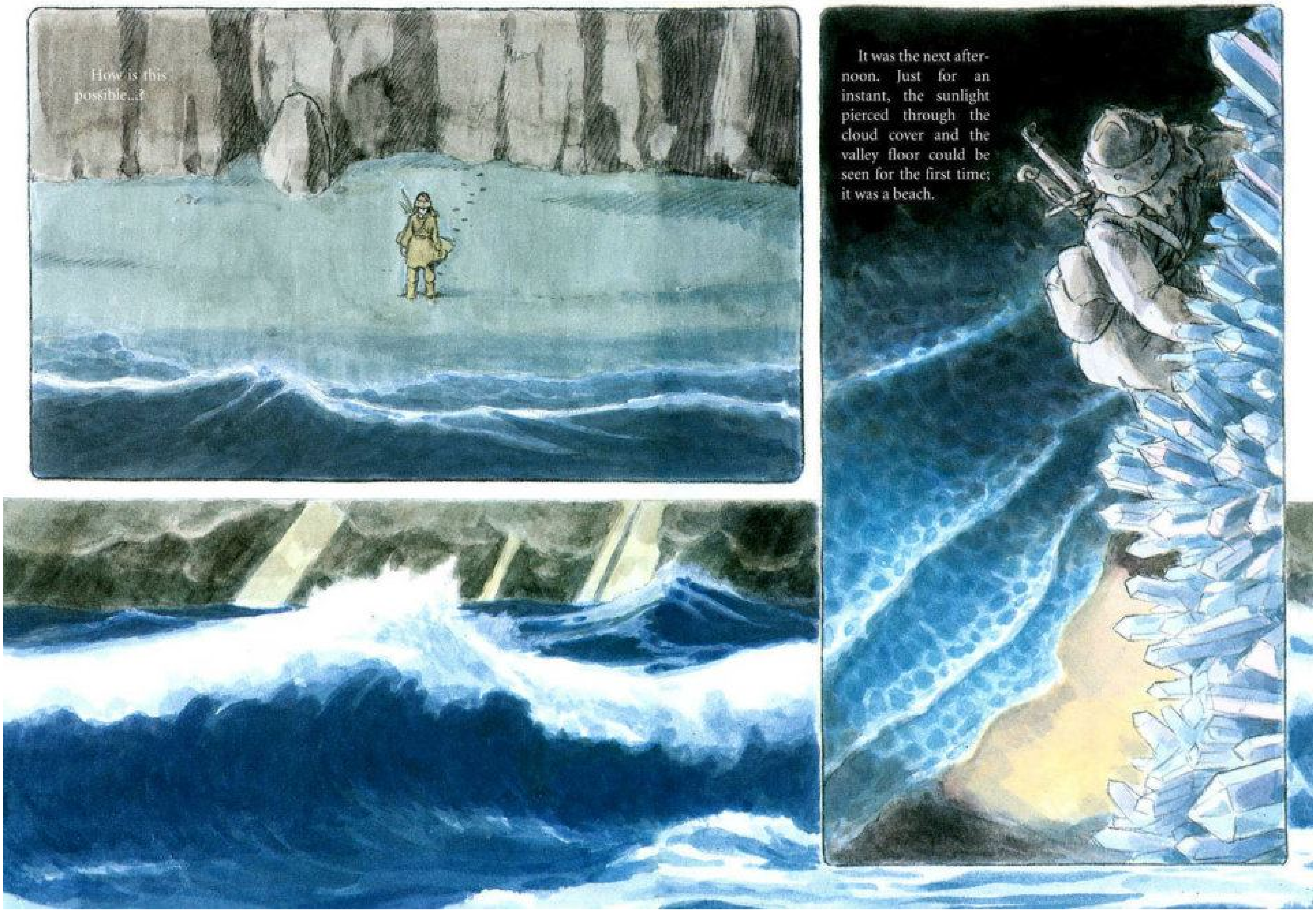


He discovered countless gods of ancient times chiseled into the rock that couldn't be seen from the top. The many forgotten, nameless deities served as fleeting handholds for his descent.

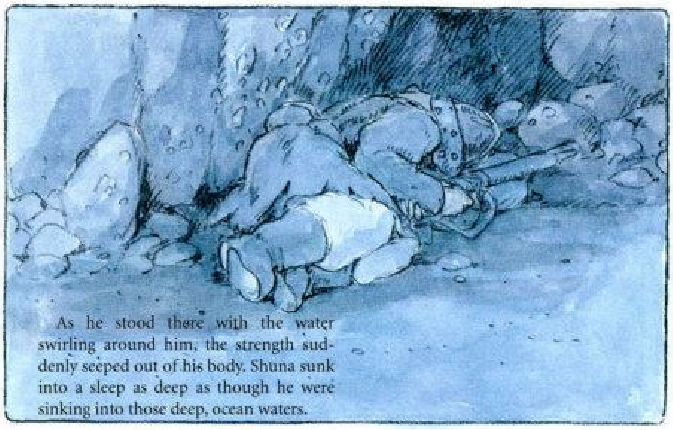


The night ended and it became light, but the opposite cliff was still veiled by whorling dust. The valley floor was covered in thick cloud and also wasn't visible. Shuna steeled himself and began the long descent down the sheer cliff face.


The rays of the sun were cut off as Shuna entered the thick cloud and he was plunged into a realm of unrelenting darkness. The gods hid themselves again and the bones of old dragons were exposed. Shuna lowered himself down upon these bones and spent his first night atop them.

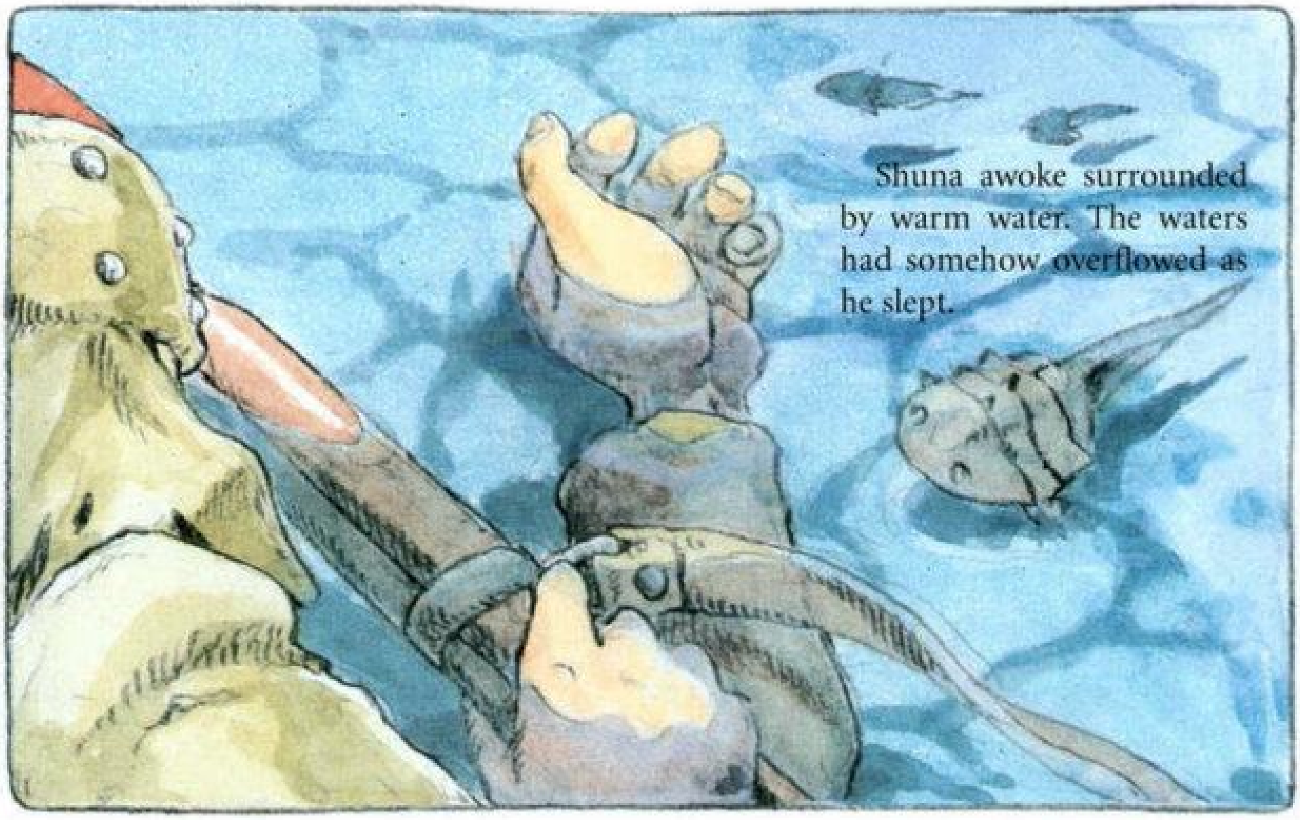

How is this
possible...?
It was the next afternoon. Just for an instant, the sunlight pierced through the cloud cover and the valley floor could be seen for the first time; it was a beach.

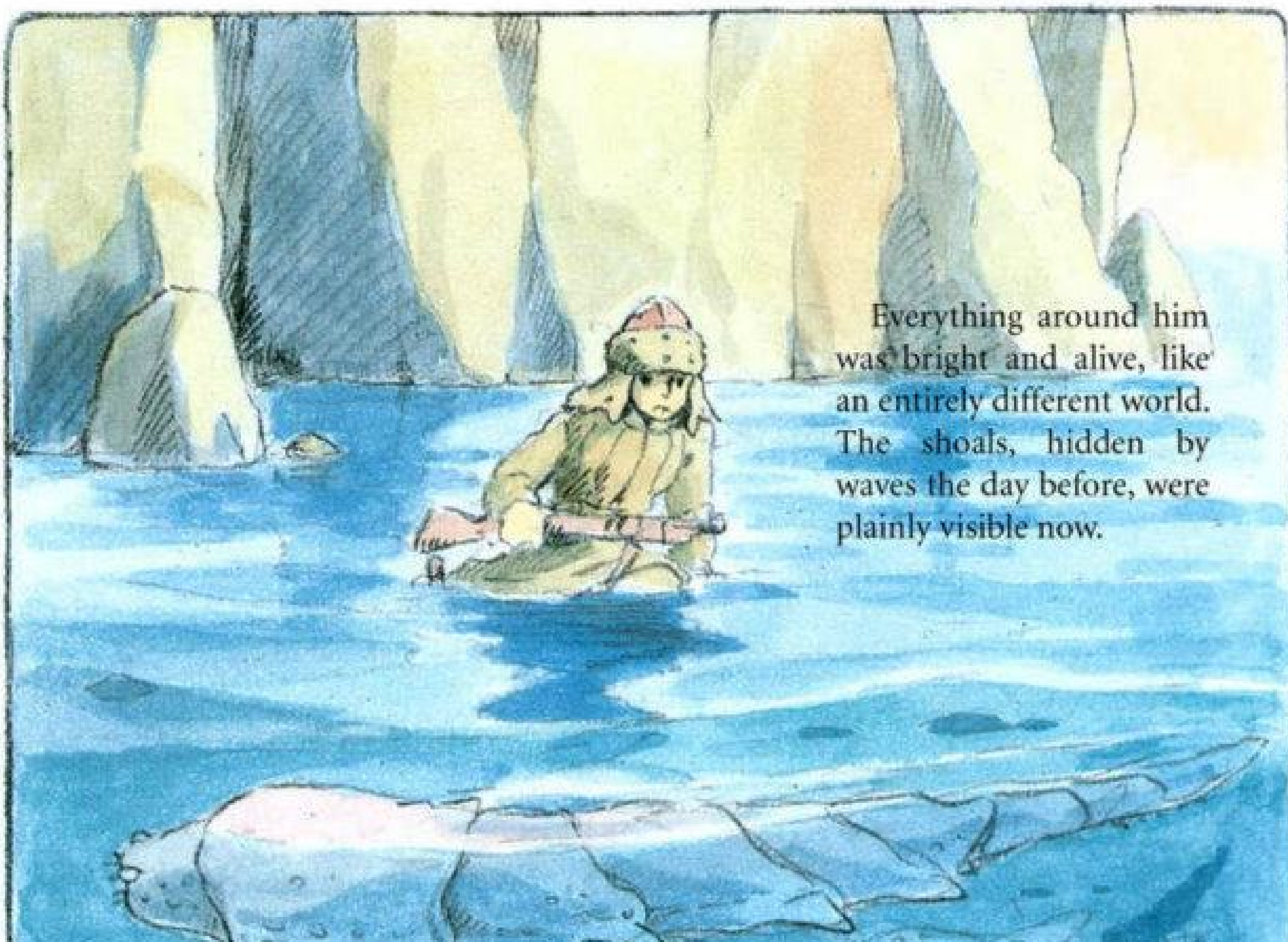


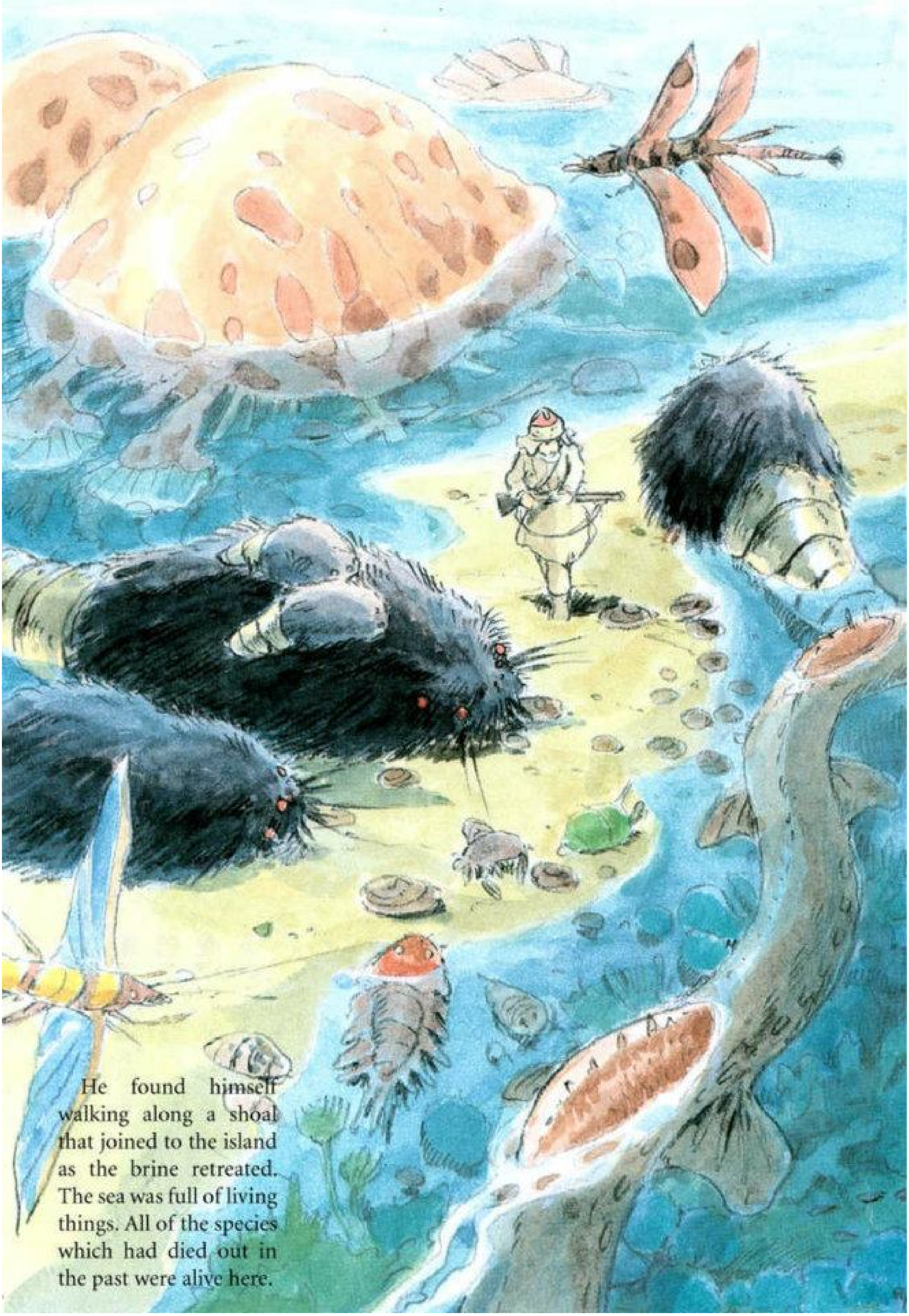


Uncertain of what he should do next, the exhausted youth tottered his way into the water to wash his hands and face. The water was cold and bitter.

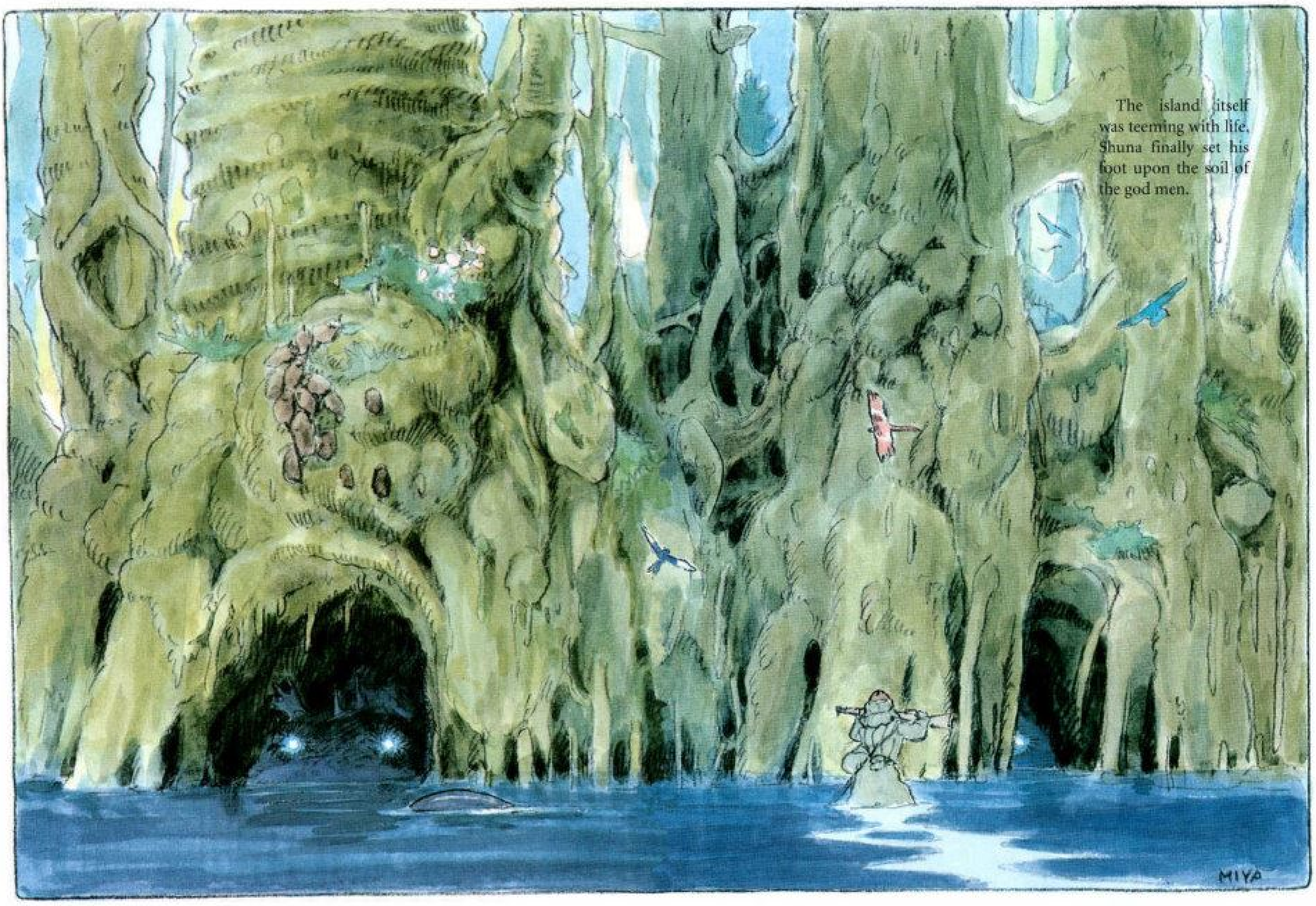


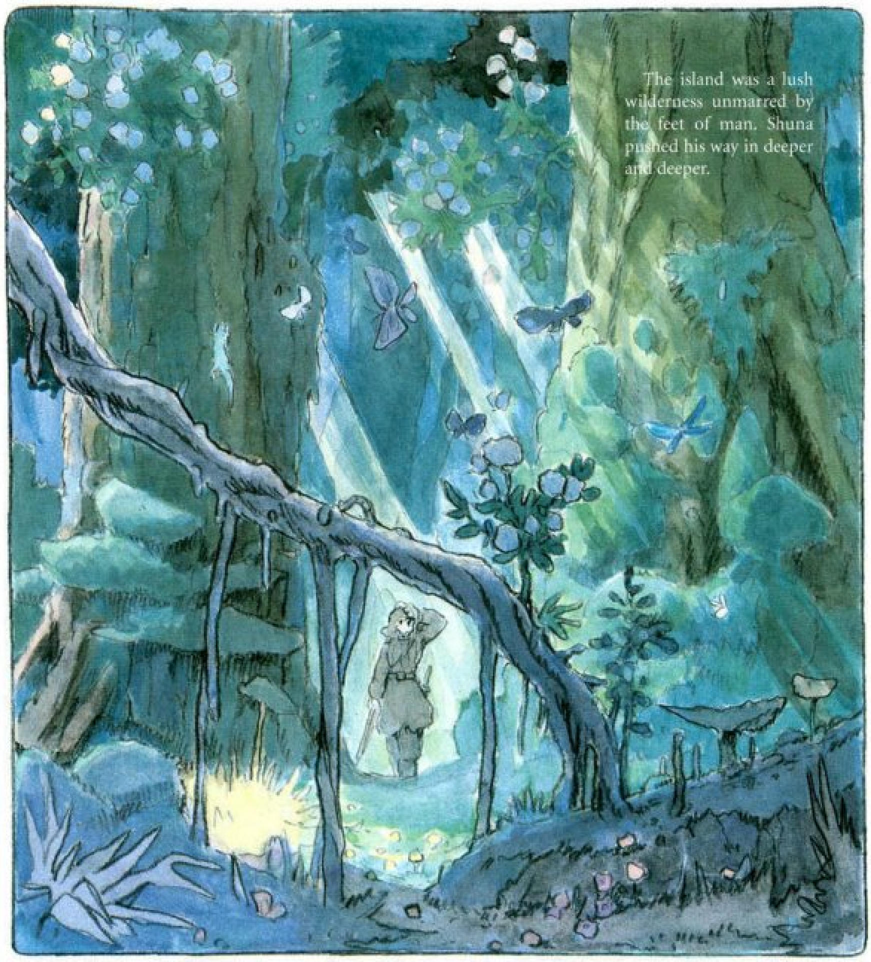

Shuna awoke surrounded by warm water. The waters had somehow overflowed as he slept.

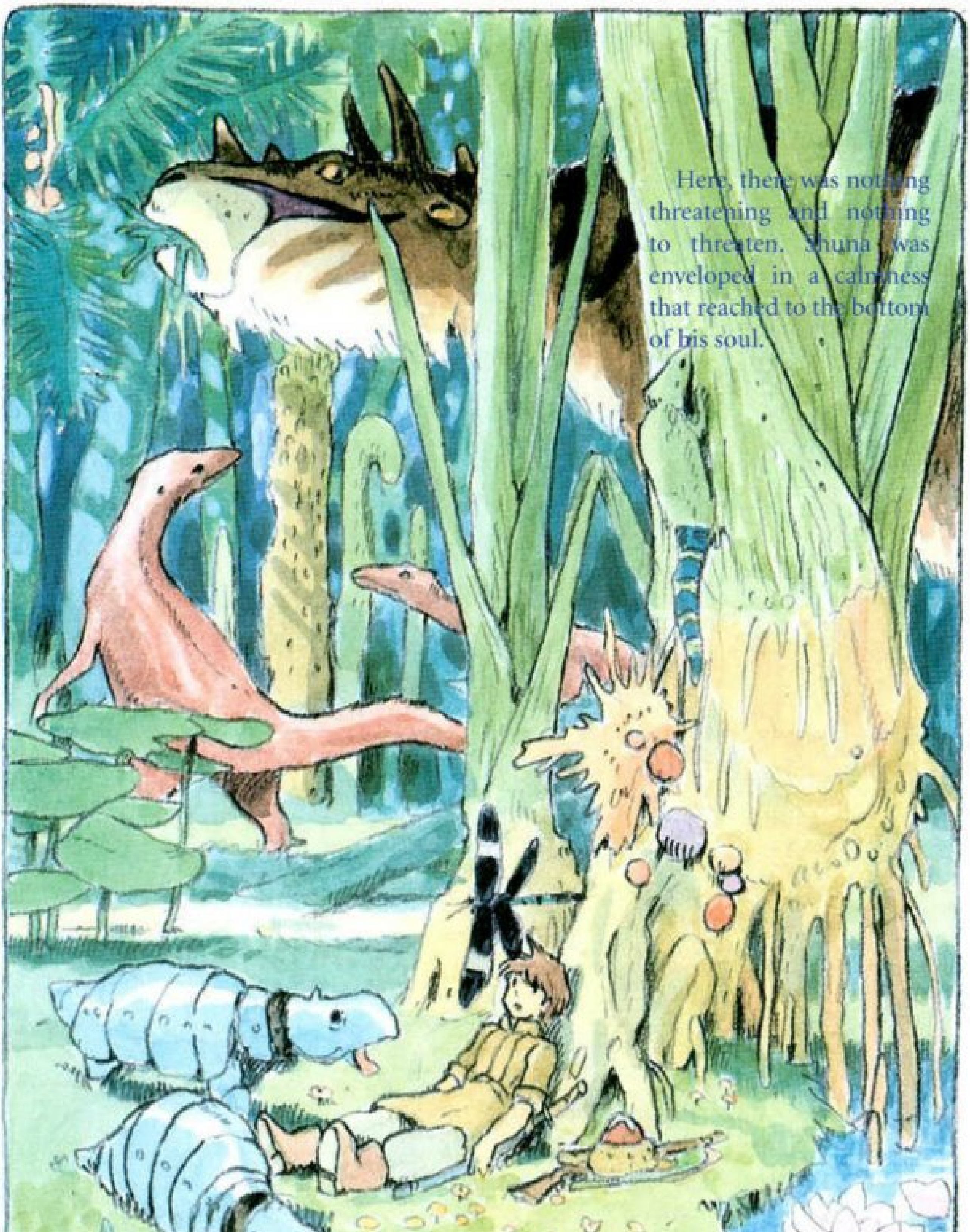

Everything around him was bright and alive, like an entirely different world. The shoals, hidden by waves the day before, were plainly visible now.



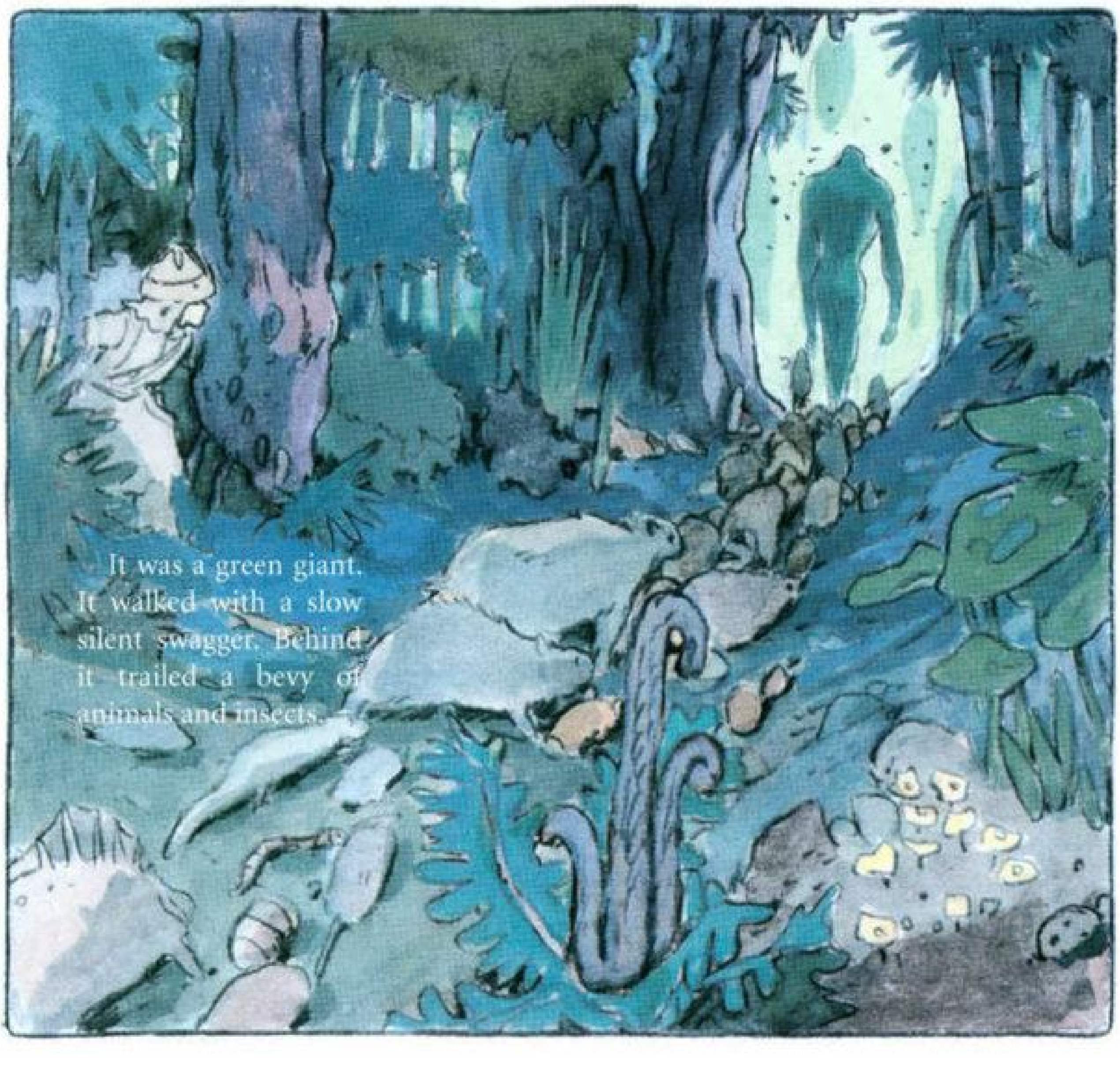
He found himself walking along a shoal that joined to the island as the brine retreated. The sea was full of living things. All of the species which had died out in the past were alive here.


The island itself was teeming with life. Shuna finally set his foot upon the soil of the god men.
MIYA


(Sigh.) Still, what a rich and peaceful world this is.

The island was a lush wilderness unmarred by the feet of man. Shuna pushed his way in deeper and deeper.


Here, there was nothing threatening and nothing to threaten. Shuna was enveloped in a calmness that reached to the bottom of his soul.


A man!
It it a god man? The words of the old man warning him that the god men didn't welcome humans stole his thoughts.


It was a green giant. It walked with a slow silent swagger. Behind it trailed a bevy of animals and insects.



Reaching the field in the middle of the forest, the giant paused.



Then it slowly fell.

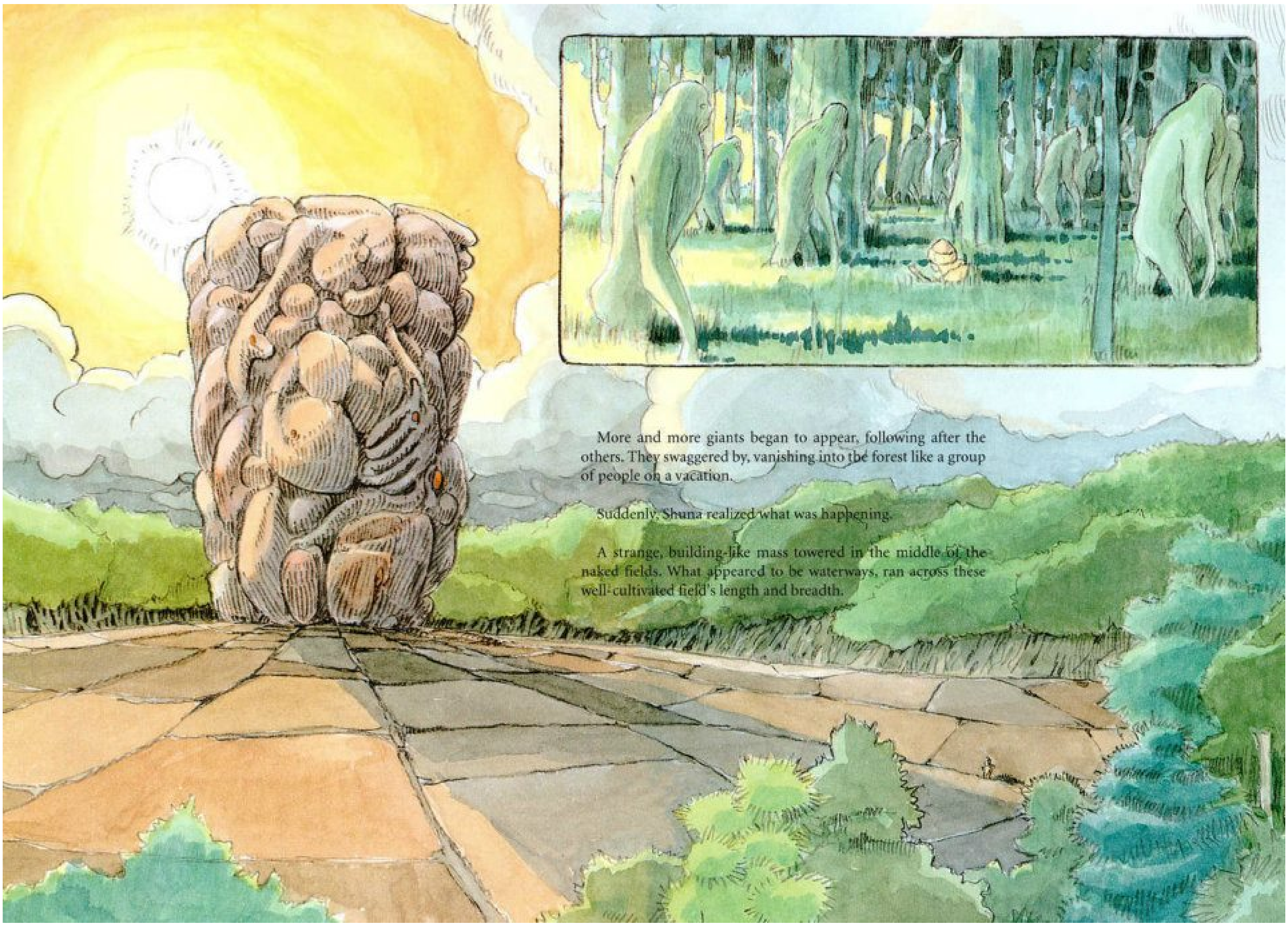




The very moment the giant completed its walk, Shuna came face to face with another. This giant gave no reaction upon seeing him, and passed on by with an expression of supreme tranquility on its face. It was wounded.

"He's going there to die...", Shuna whispered with a shudder.

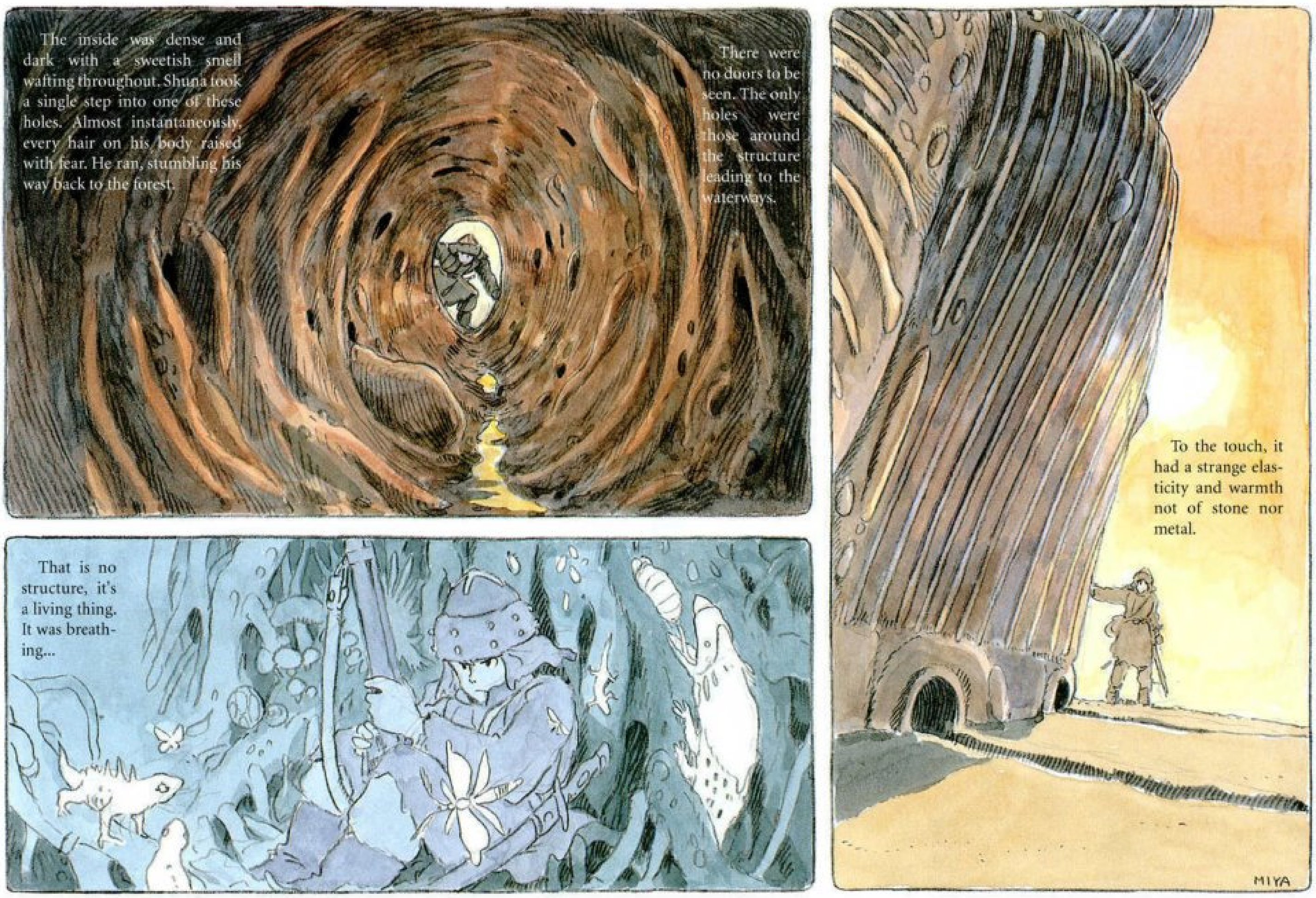




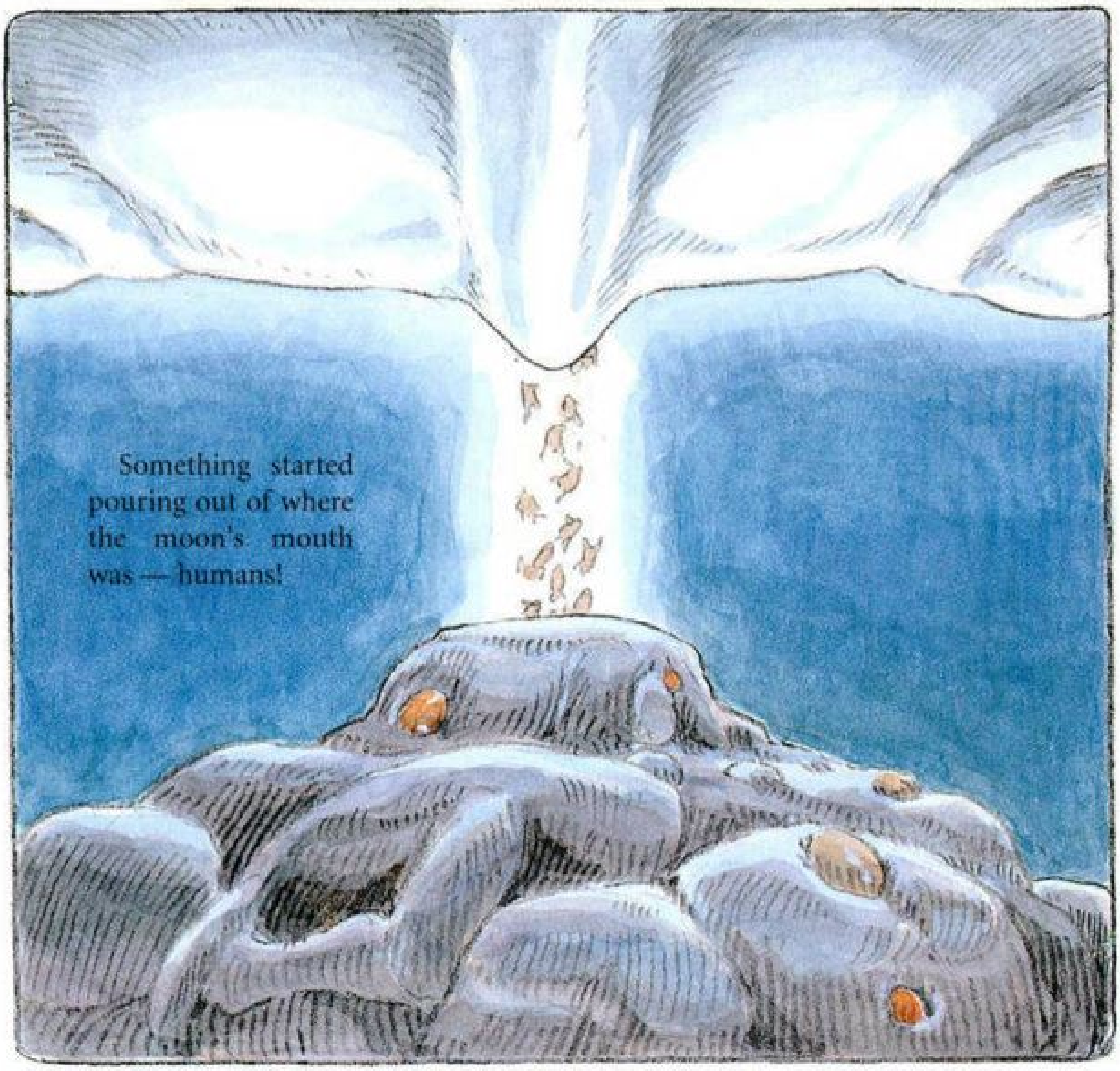
More and more giants began to appear, following after the others. They swaggered by, vanishing into the forest like a group of people on a vacation.

Suddenly, Shuna realized what was happening.

A strange, building-like mass towered in the middle of the naked fields. What appeared to be waterways, ran across these well-cultivated field's length and breadth.


The inside was dense and dark with a sweetish smell wafting throughout. Shuna took a single step into one of these holes. Almost instantaneously, every hair on his body raised with fear. He ran, stumbling his way back to the forest.
There were no doors to be seen. The only holes were those around the structure leading to the waterways.
That is no structure, it's a living thing. It was breathing...
To the touch, it had a strange elasticity and warmth not of stone nor metal.
MIYA

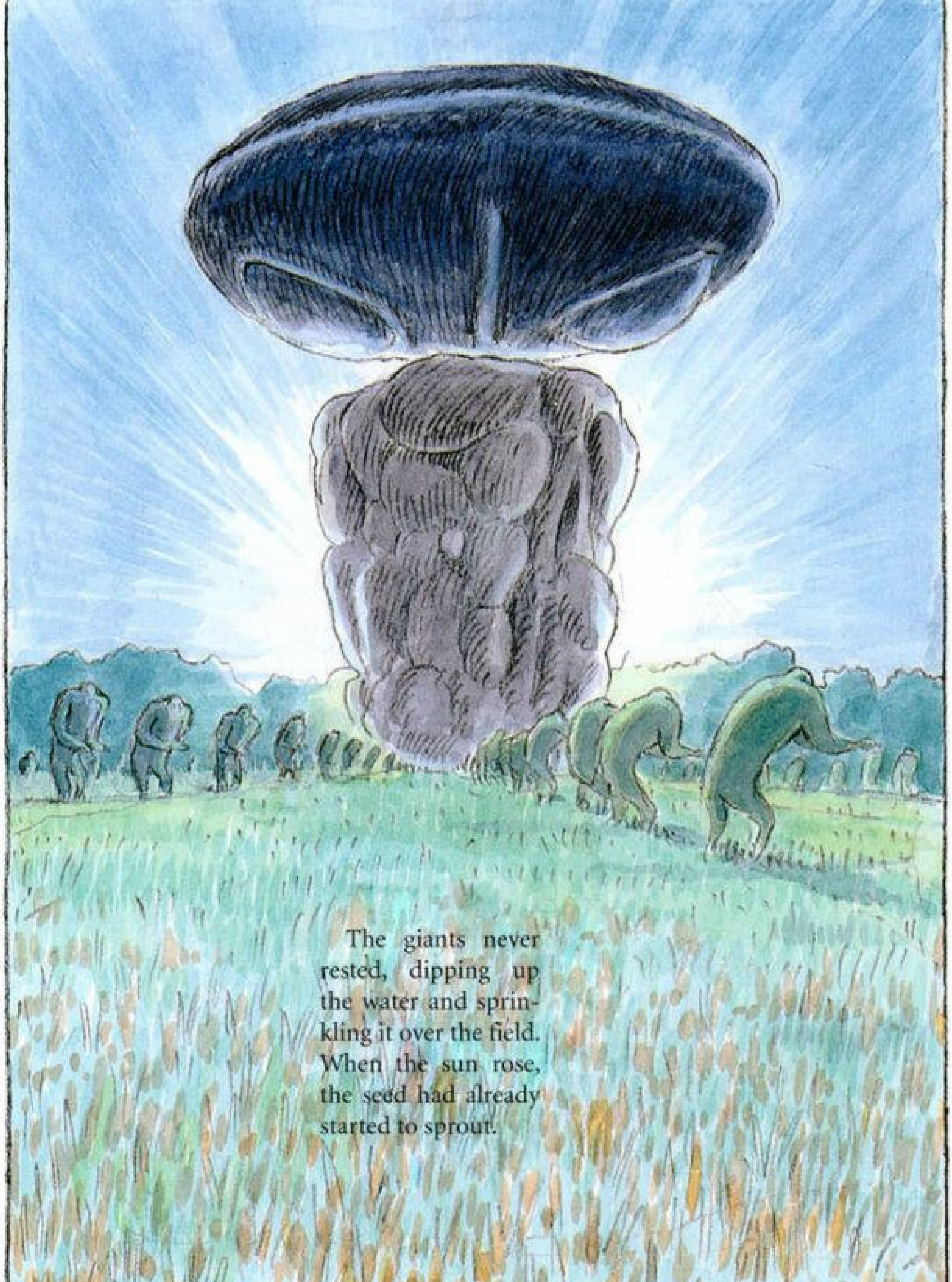

In the dead of the night, the moon returned, stopping directly over the structure.


Something started pouring out of where the moon's mouth was — humans!

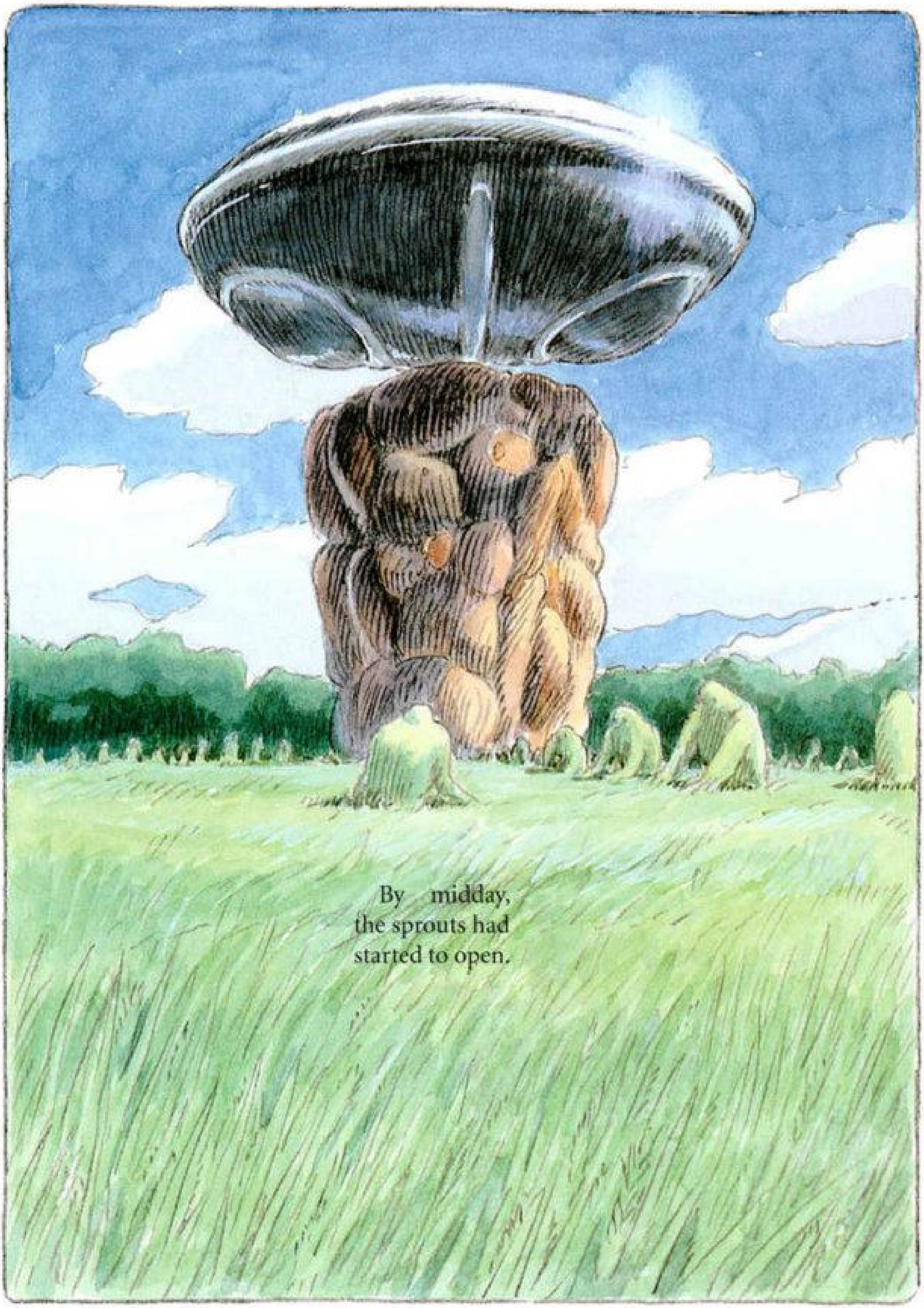

What the old man had said was true. Those were people that the god men had collected from slave traders.


Once the giant mass had sucked in all of the people, it slowly began to shake.
How much time had passed?
The moon extinguished its light and everything returned to silence. Then, water glowing with phosphorescence began to trickle from the holes, pouring into the waterways connected to the field.
That's when Shuna saw it happen.
He saw many, many forms rising out of the water.
They were giants, but newly born.


Had the people who had been sucked inside been reborn into these giants? Or had they been changed into the water which fed this field? Shuna couldn't tell.
The giants fanned out, swaying across the field, spraying golden seed onto the earth from their mouth orifices.

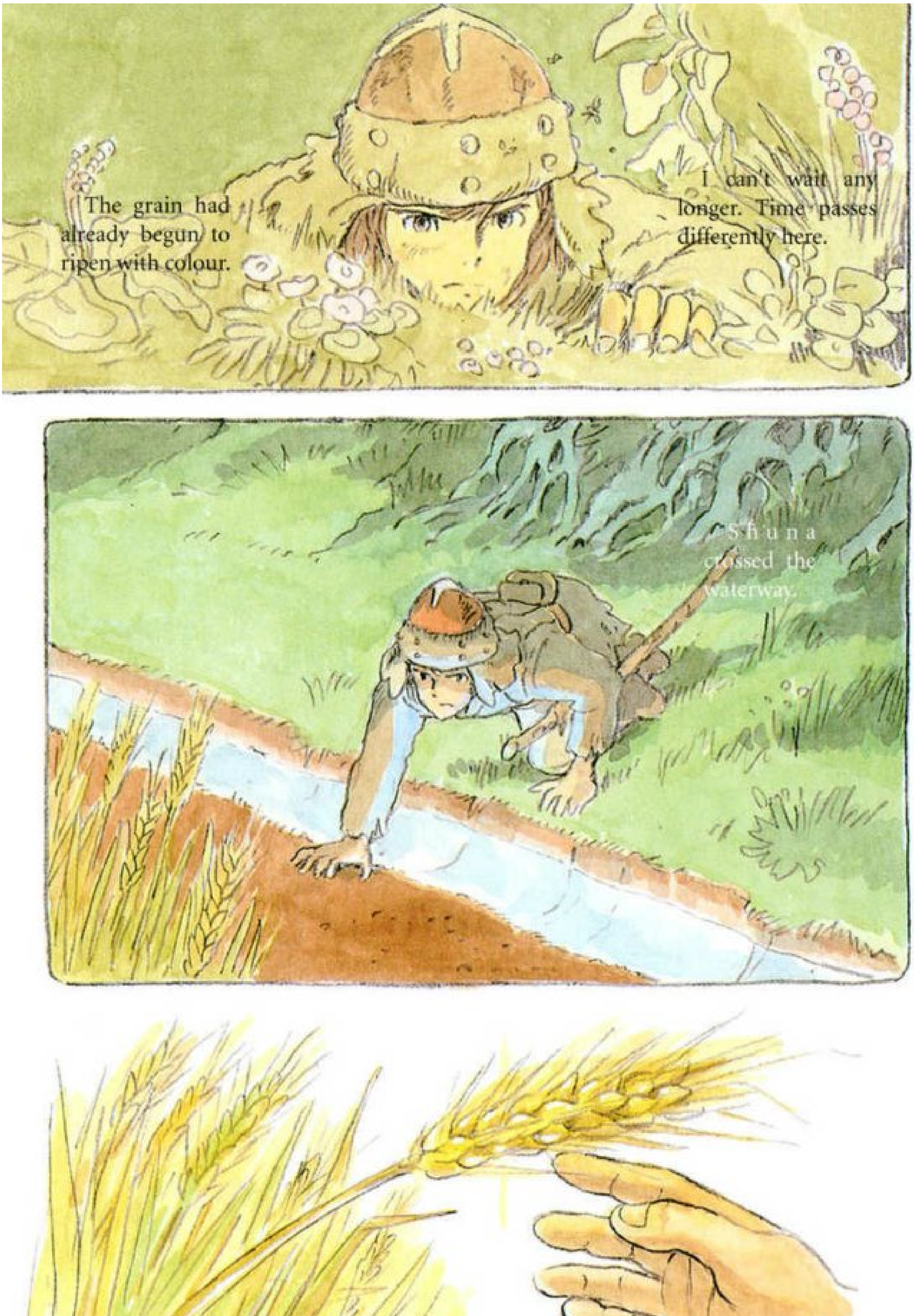


The giants never rested, dipping up the water and sprinkling it over the field. When the sun rose, the seed had already started to sprout.


By midday,
the sprouts had
started to open.


Shuna glanced down at the gun at his side, and gasped.


It was rusted to uselessness in only half a day. His knife and clothes were in the same condition.

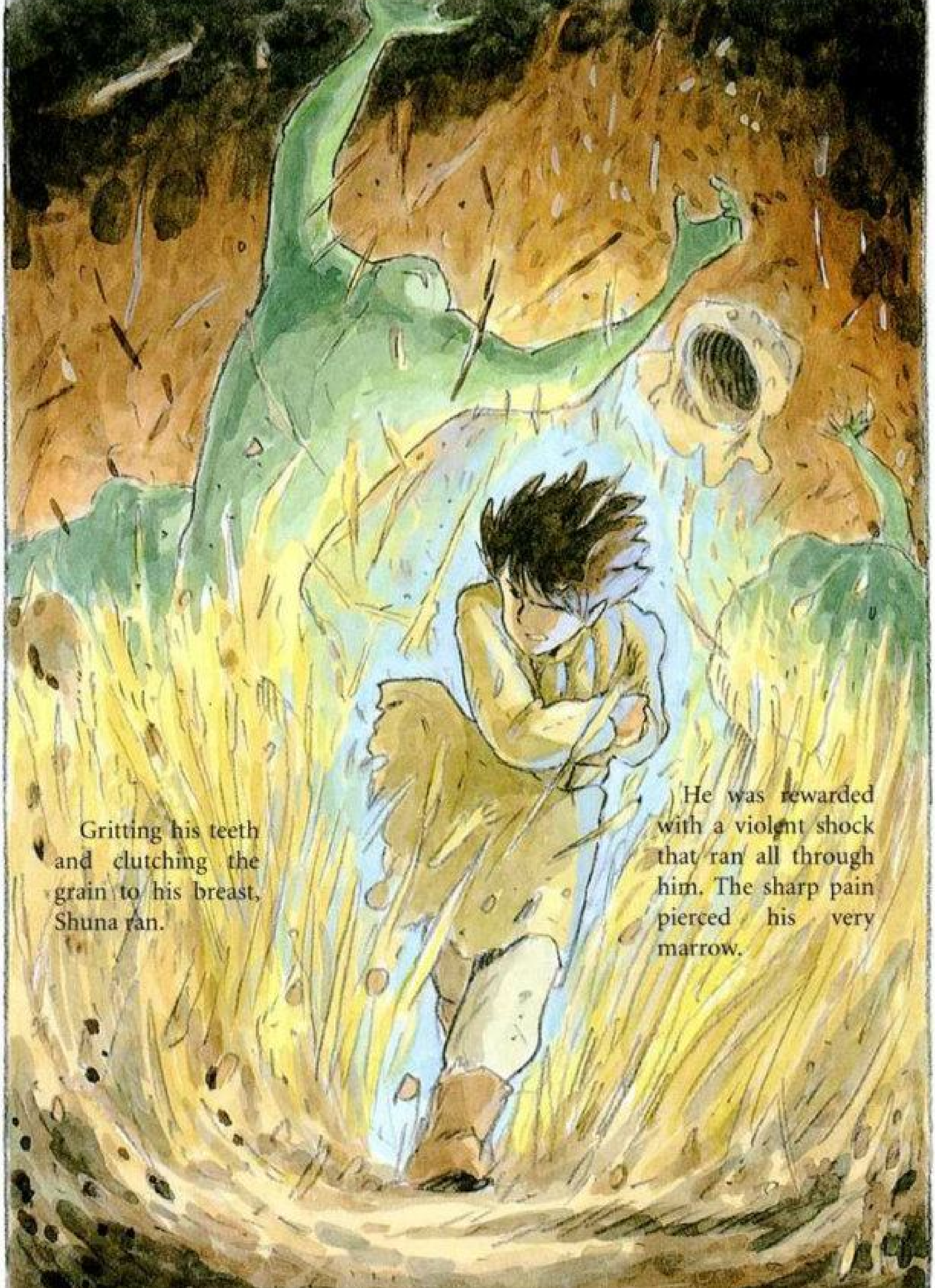


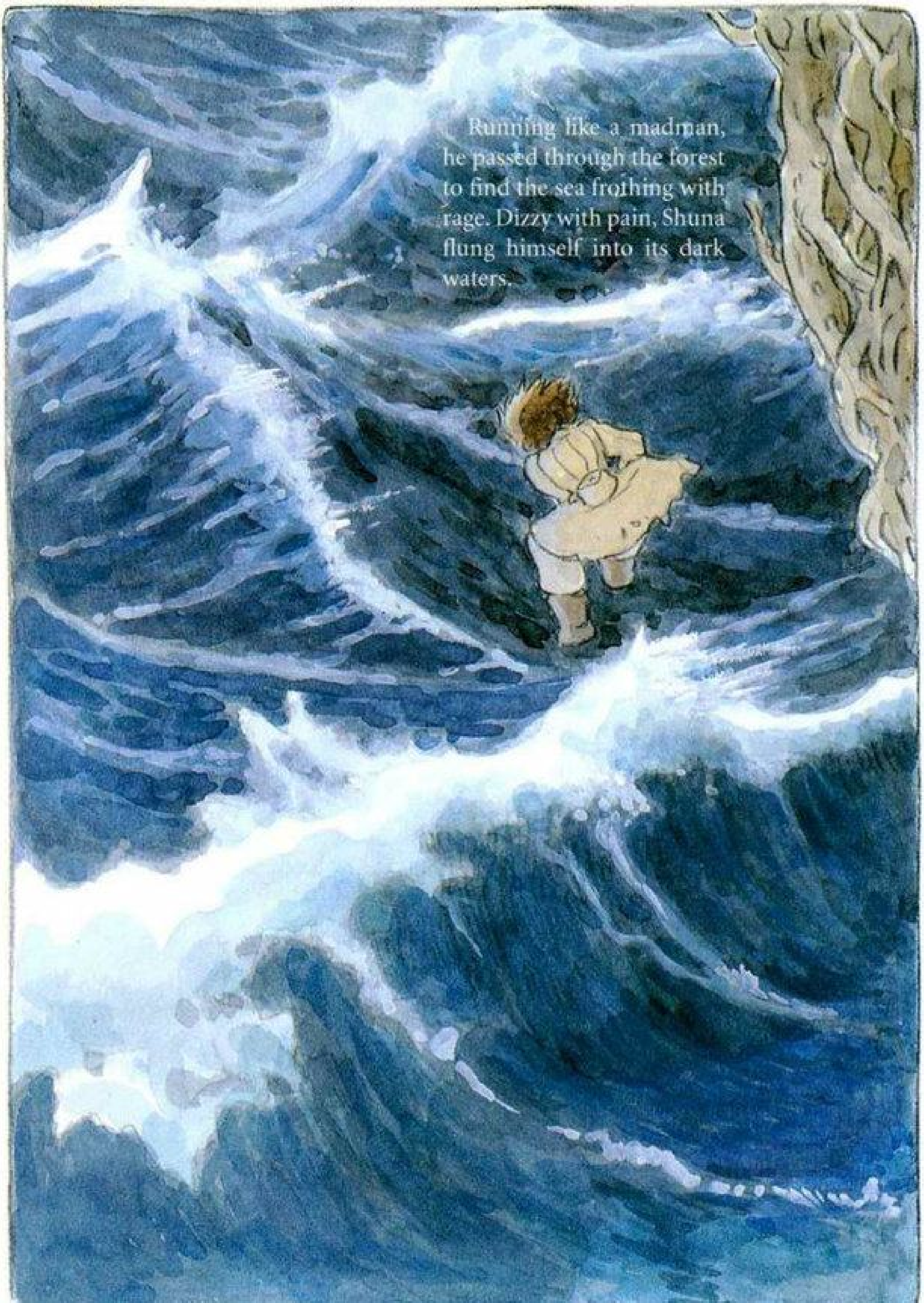
The grain had already begun to ripen with colour.
I can't wait any longer. Time passes differently here.
Shuna crossed the waterway.

His hand reached out to touch the grain. As it made contact, the giants suddenly began to writhe and scream with moans as though they were wailing with sadness or the pain of being ripped limb from limb.

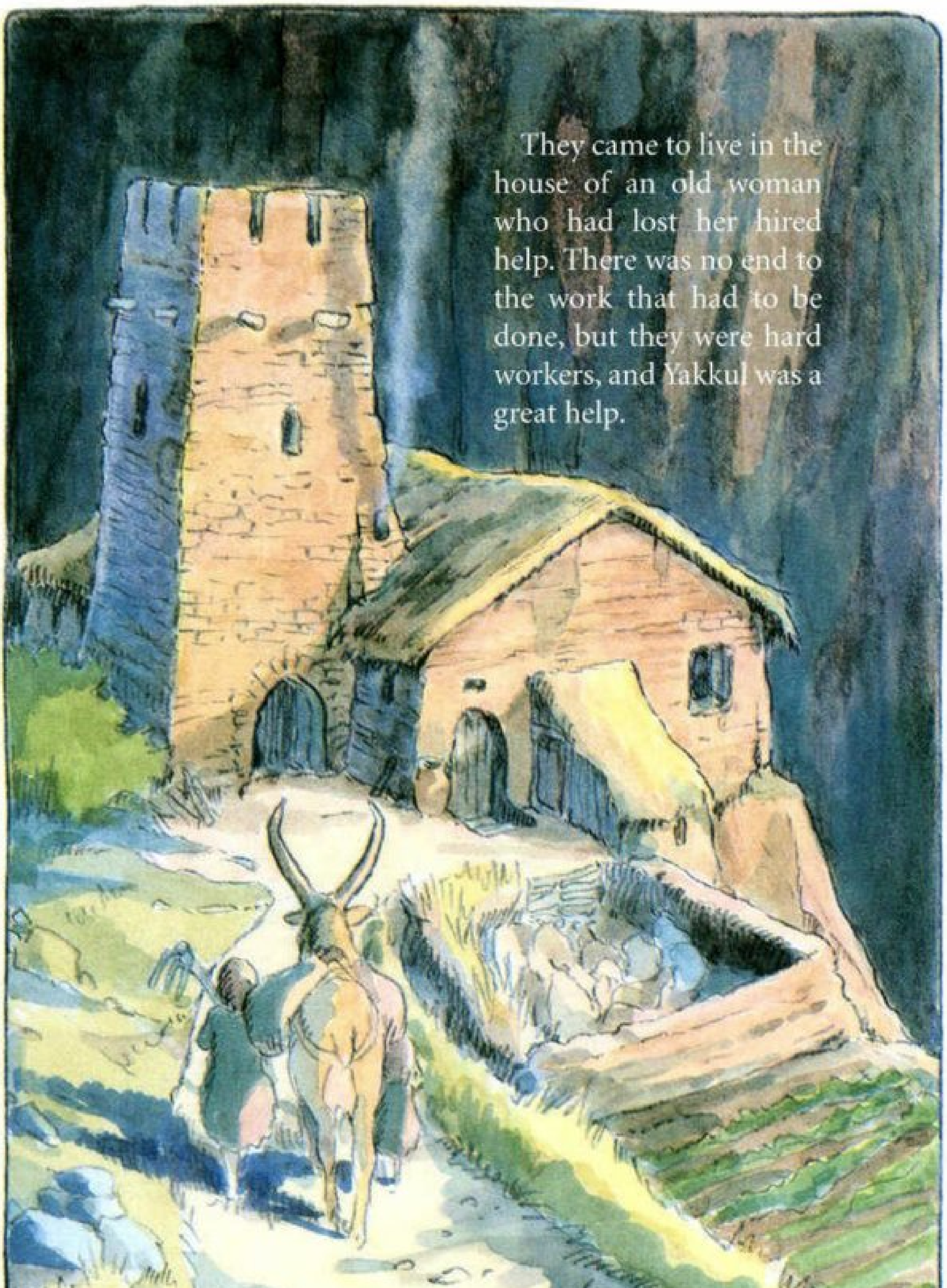
"Don't! Don't!", someone's voice rang shrill in his ears. But Shuna ignored the voice and plucked the grain.




Gritting his teeth and clutching the grain to his breast, Shuna ran.
He was rewarded with a violent shock that ran all through him. The sharp pain pierced his very marrow.

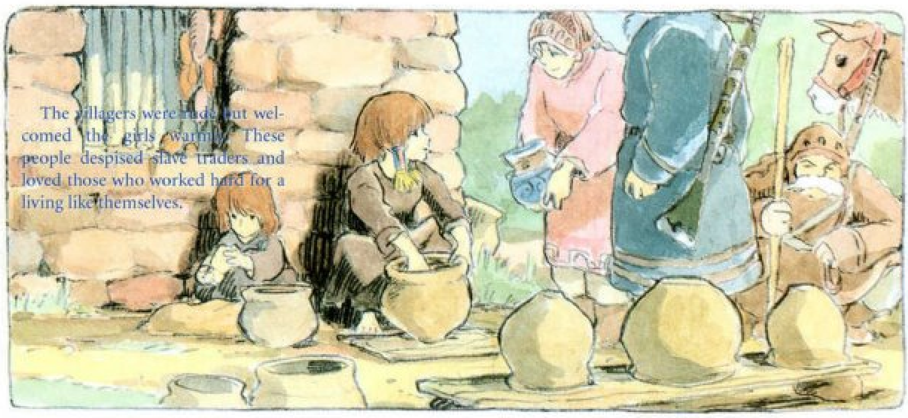

Running like a madman, he passed through the forest to find the sea frothing with rage. Dizzy with pain, Shuna flung himself into its dark waters.

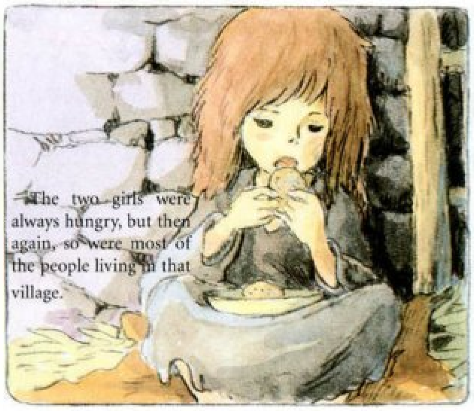

Thea
It had been almost a year since Thea and her little sister had arrived at this poor village in the north.



They came to live in the house of an old woman who had lost her hired help. There was no end to the work that had to be done, but they were hard workers, and Yakkul was a great help.

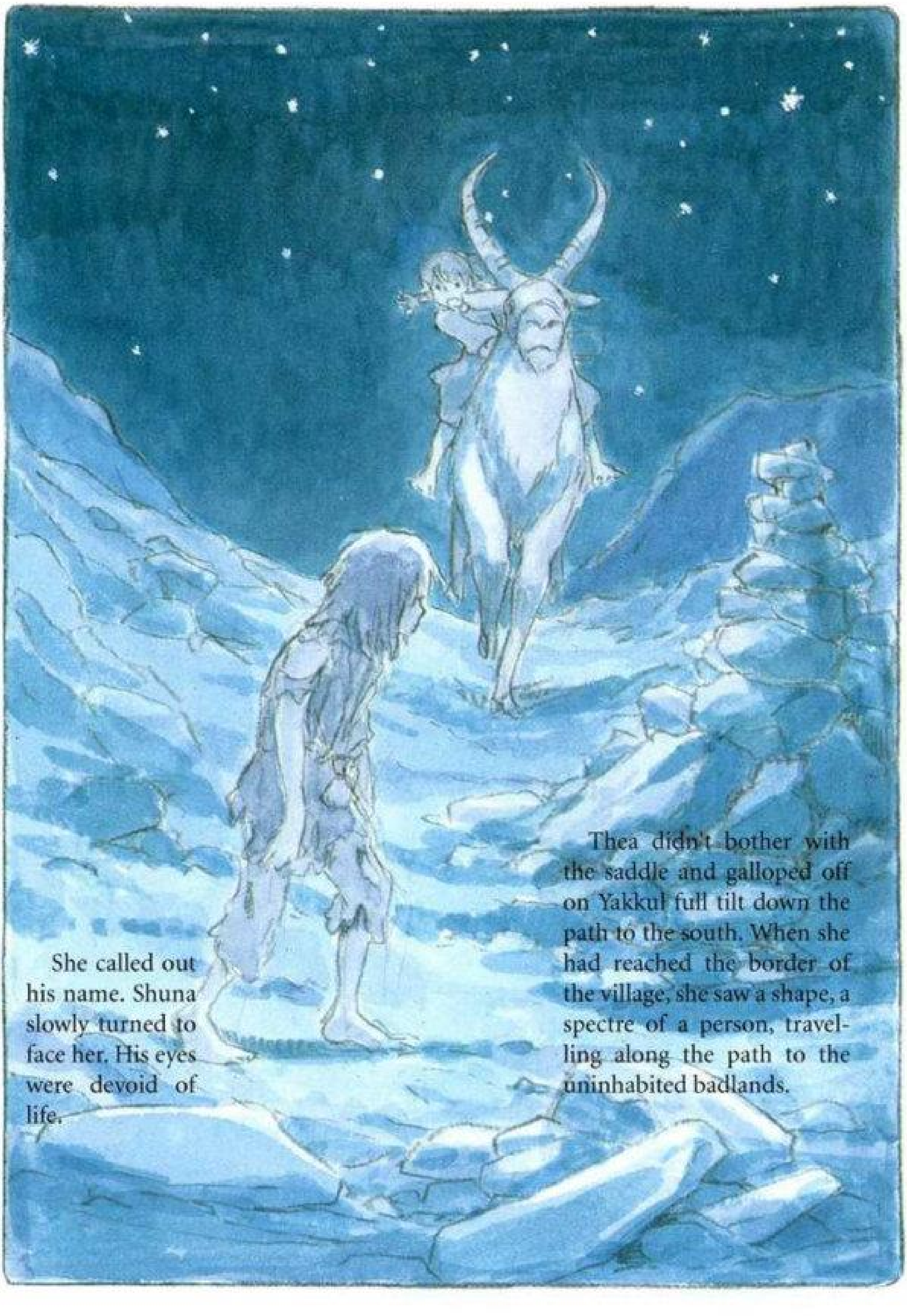

The old woman was stingy and hard to deal with but did not have an evil heart.
Thea knew well that her faultfinding way of speech was a thing commonly found with the unhappy aged.
MIYA


The villagers were rude, but welcomed the girls warmly. These people despised slave traders and loved those who worked hard for a living like themselves.


The two girls were always hungry, but then again, so were most of the people living in that village.

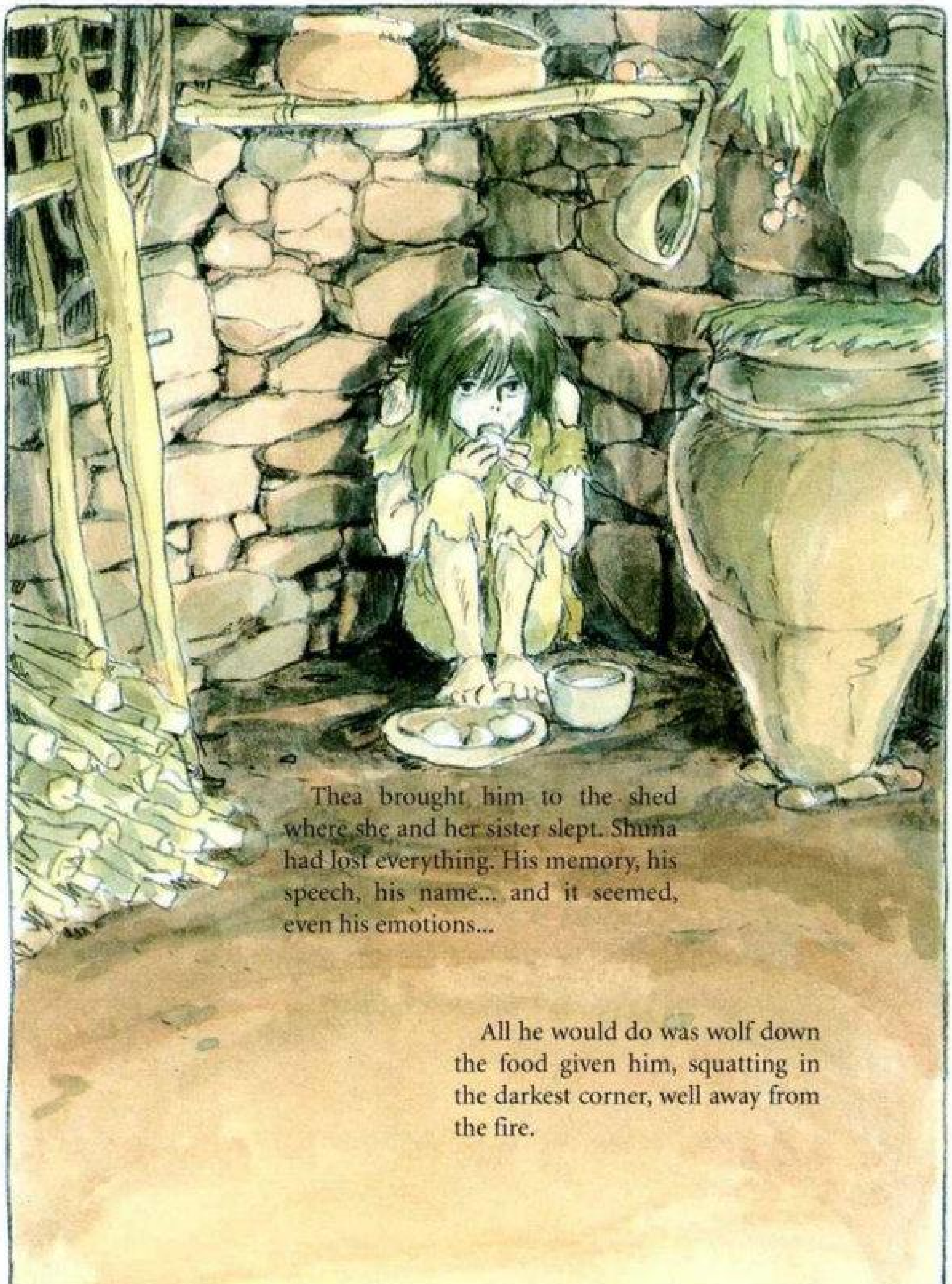

All of a sudden, Thea felt she could hear Shuna's voice, calling for help.
That night, her unease was particularly bad. Even Yakkul was eternally fidgeting, his nose working as he tested the odor of the air.


Where could Shuna be?
Thea was a small girl, so she knew she had to stay where she was. But whenever she imagined that something had happened to him, her chest felt as though it would split open.
Thea was a strong girl who would not voice complaints to anyone. However, when each busy month was over, she found herself hopelessly attacked by heartache.



Thea didn't bother with the saddle and galloped off on Yakkul full tilt down the path to the south. When she had reached the border of the village, she saw a shape, a spectre of a person, travelling along the path to the uninhabited badlands.

She called out his name. Shuna slowly turned to face her. His eyes were devoid of life.

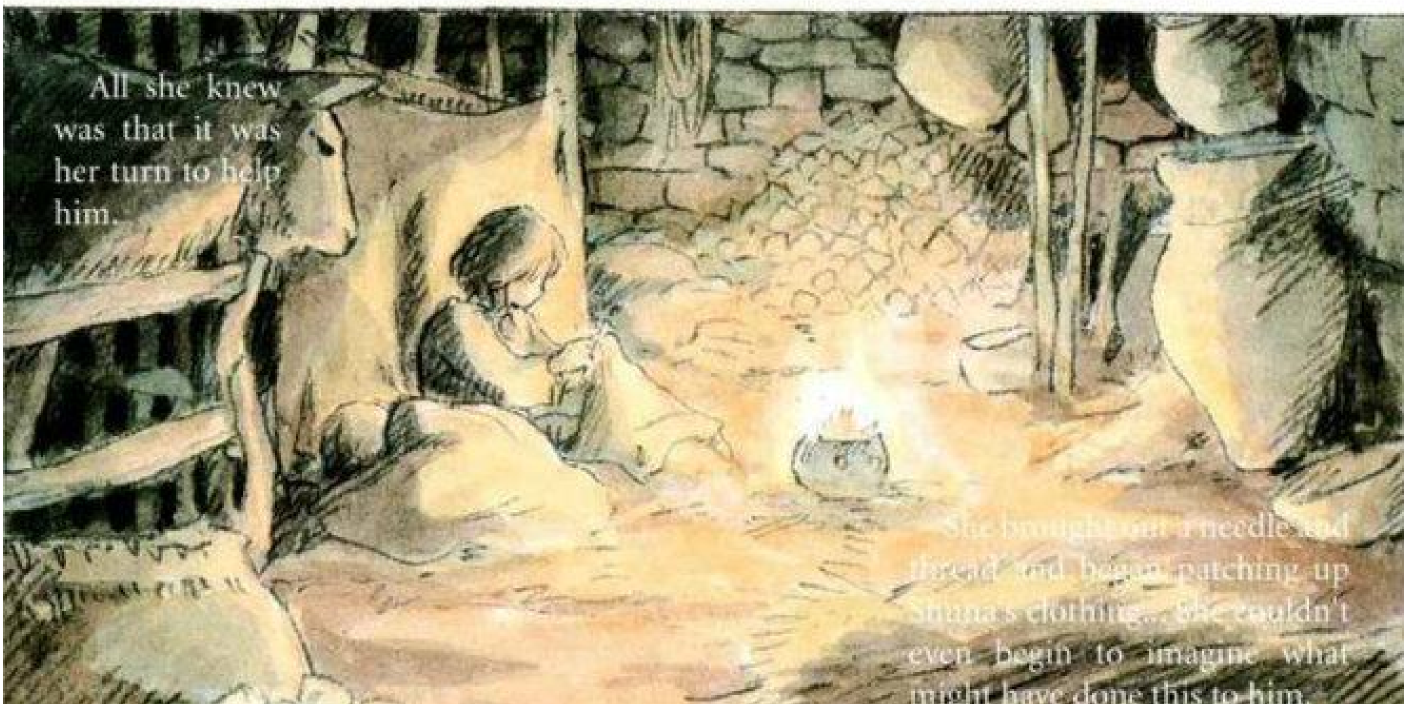


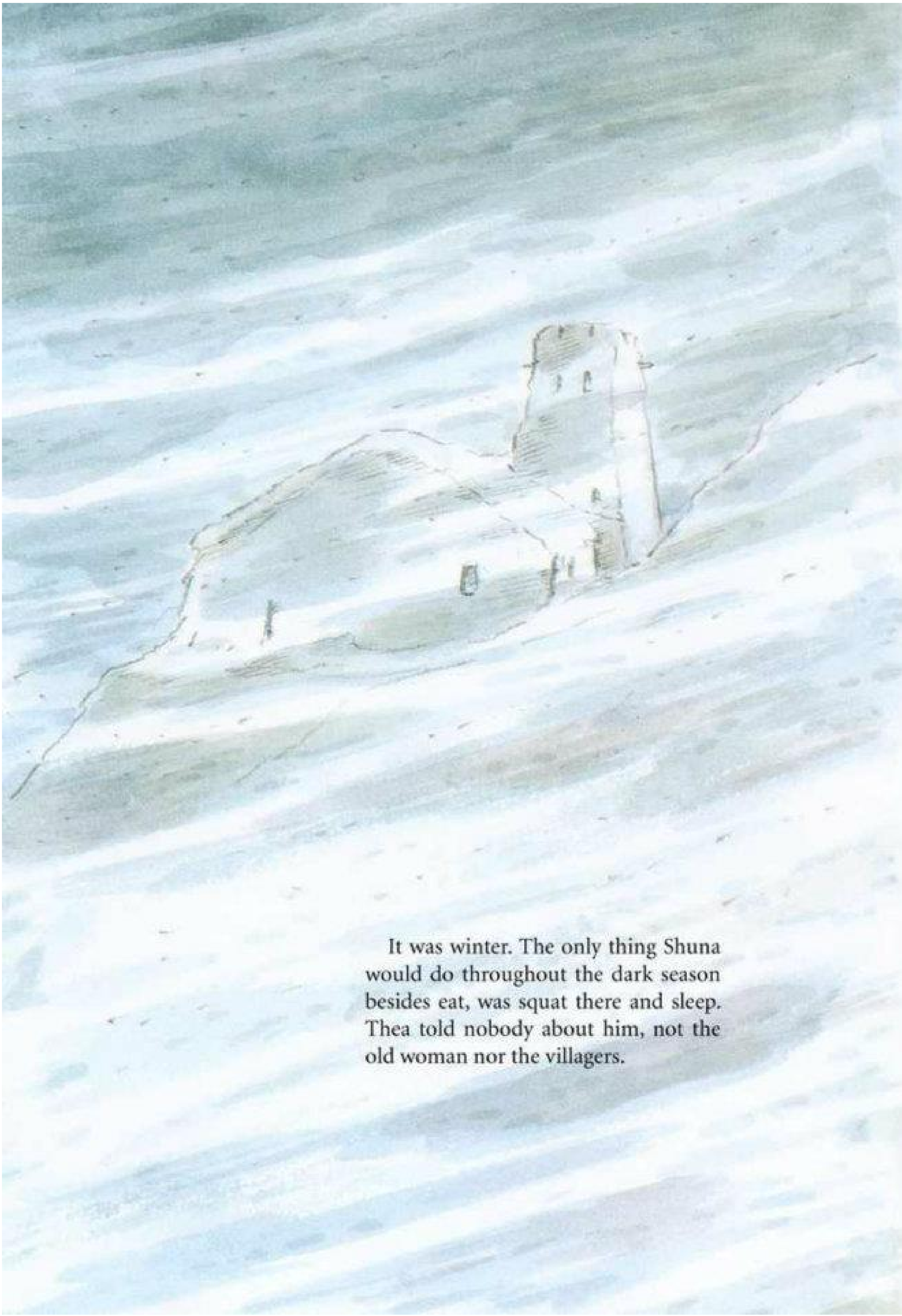
Thea brought him to the shed where she and her sister slept. Shuna had lost everything. His memory, his speech, his name... and it seemed, even his emotions...

All he would do was wolf down the food given him, squatting in the darkest corner, well away from the fire.

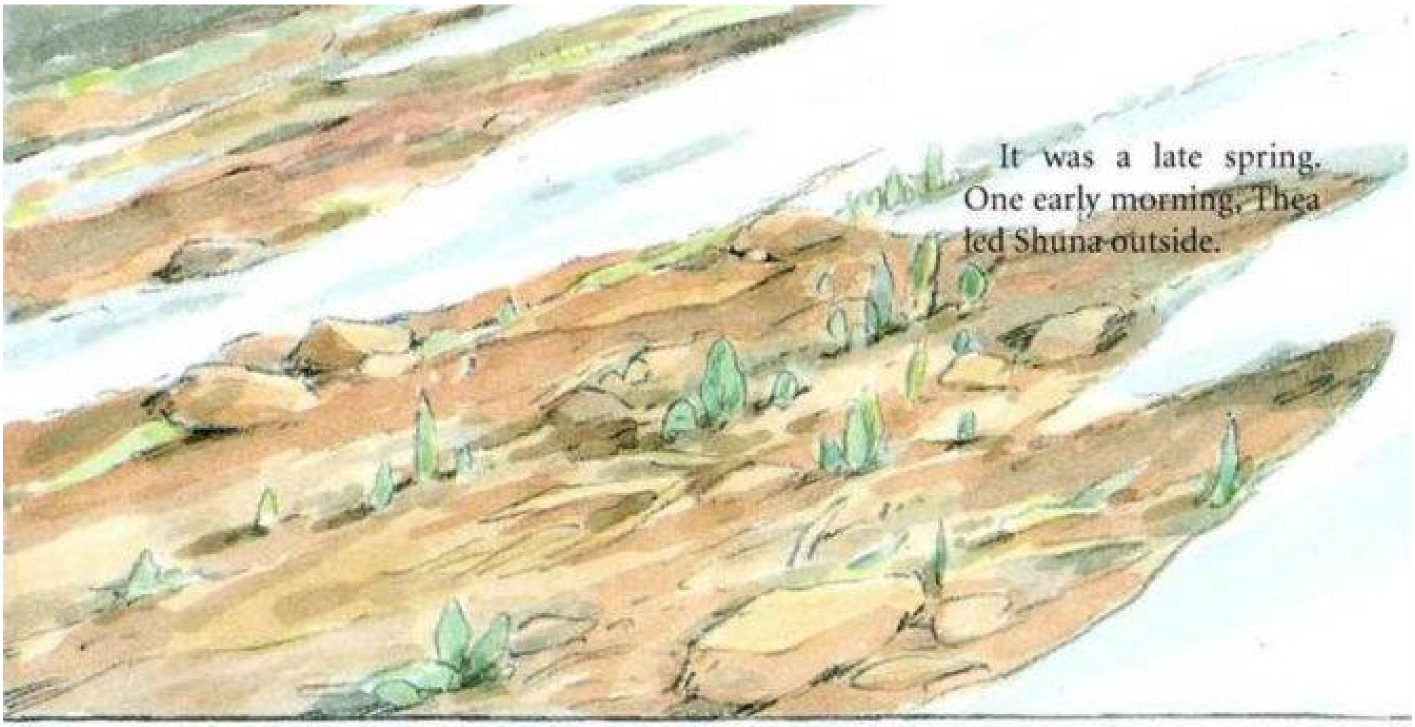

Thea gently opened the pouch that he wore guardedly around his neck.


Something hot rose in her chest and she felt close to tears.
Golden seeds...

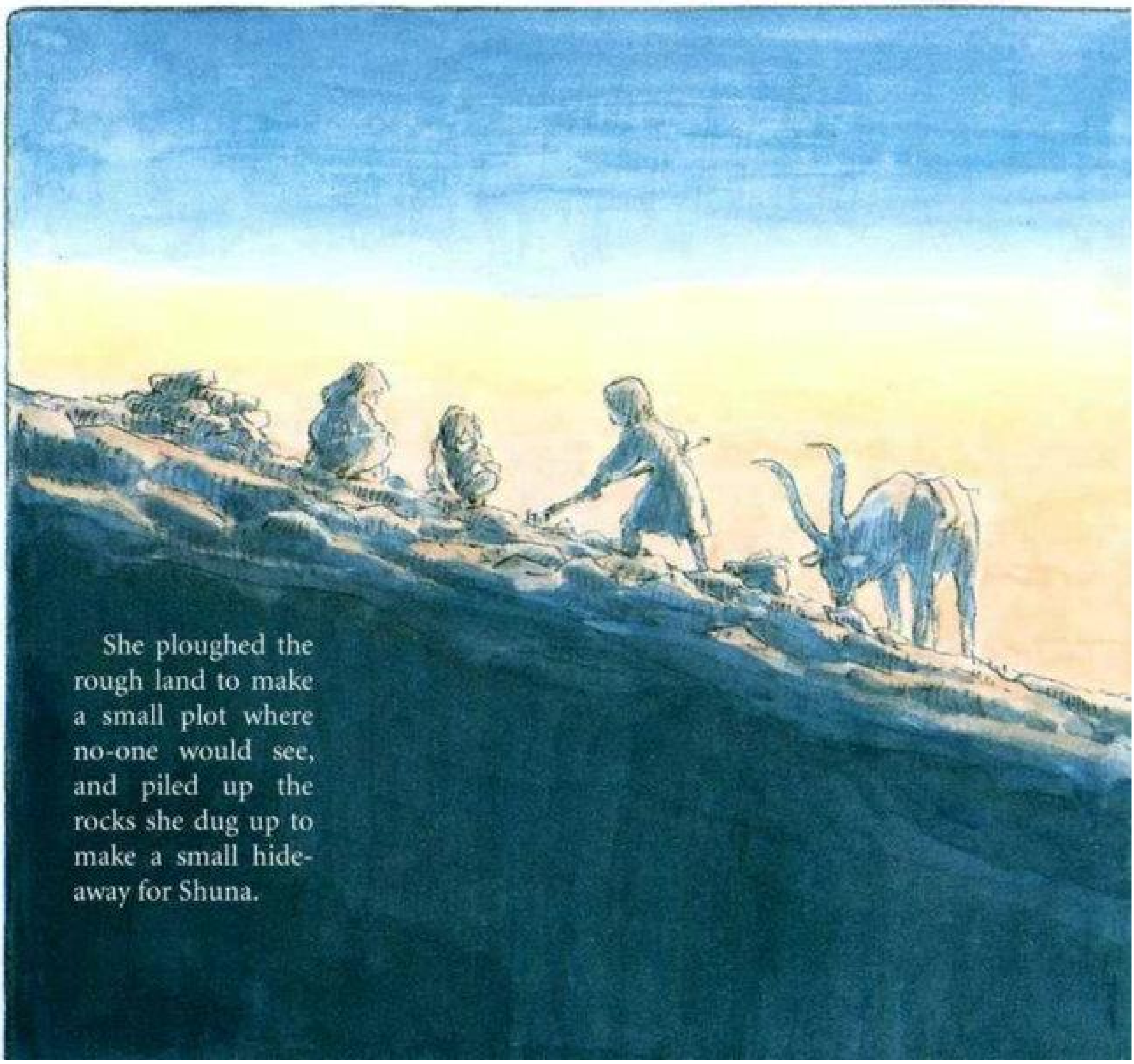

All she knew was that it was her turn to help him.
She brought out a needle and thread and began patching up Shuna's clothing... She couldn't even begin to imagine what might have done this to him.



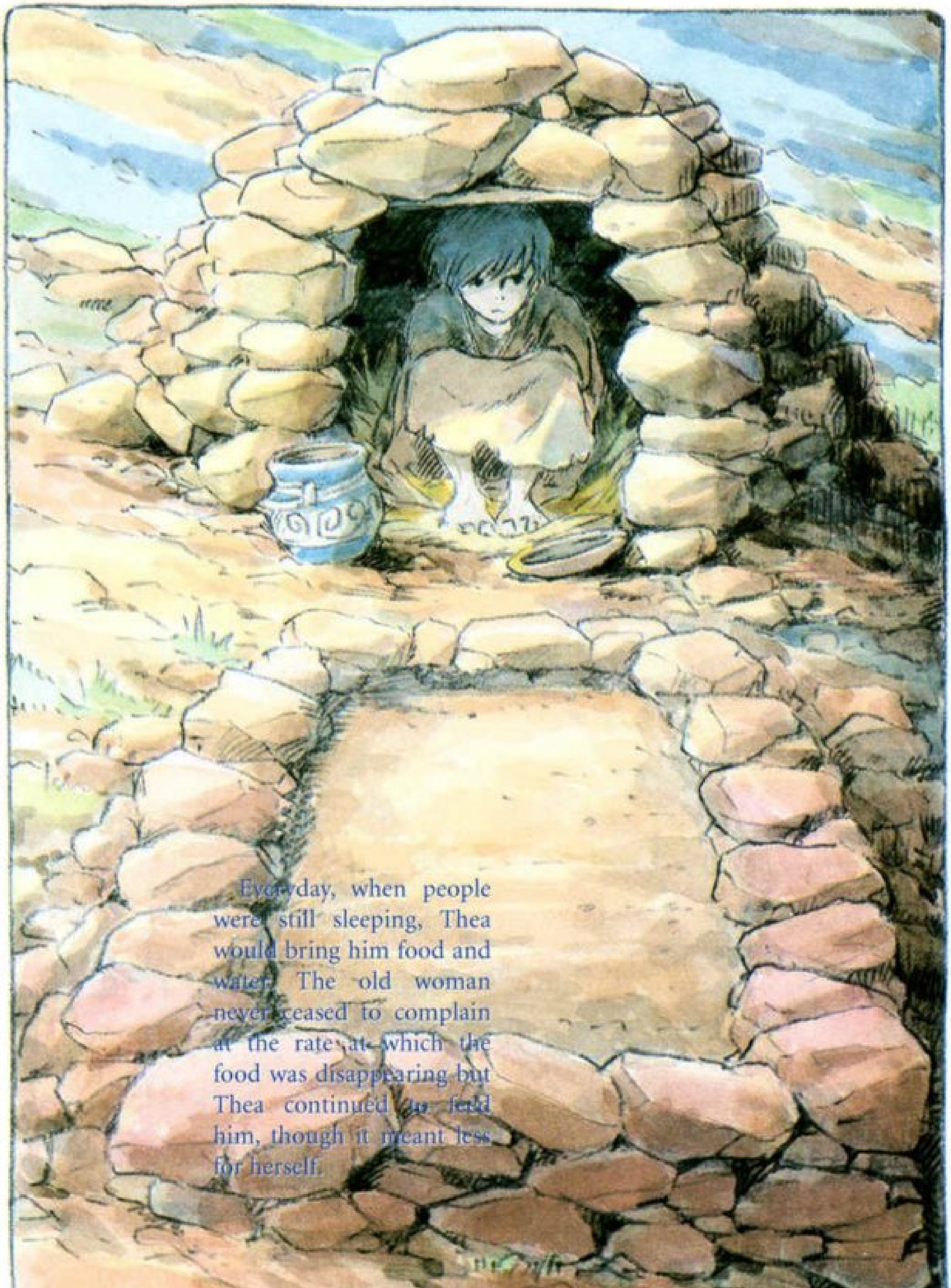
It was winter. The only thing Shuna would do throughout the dark season besides eat, was squat there and sleep. Thea told nobody about him, not the old woman nor the villagers.



It was a late spring. One early morning, Thea led Shuna outside.



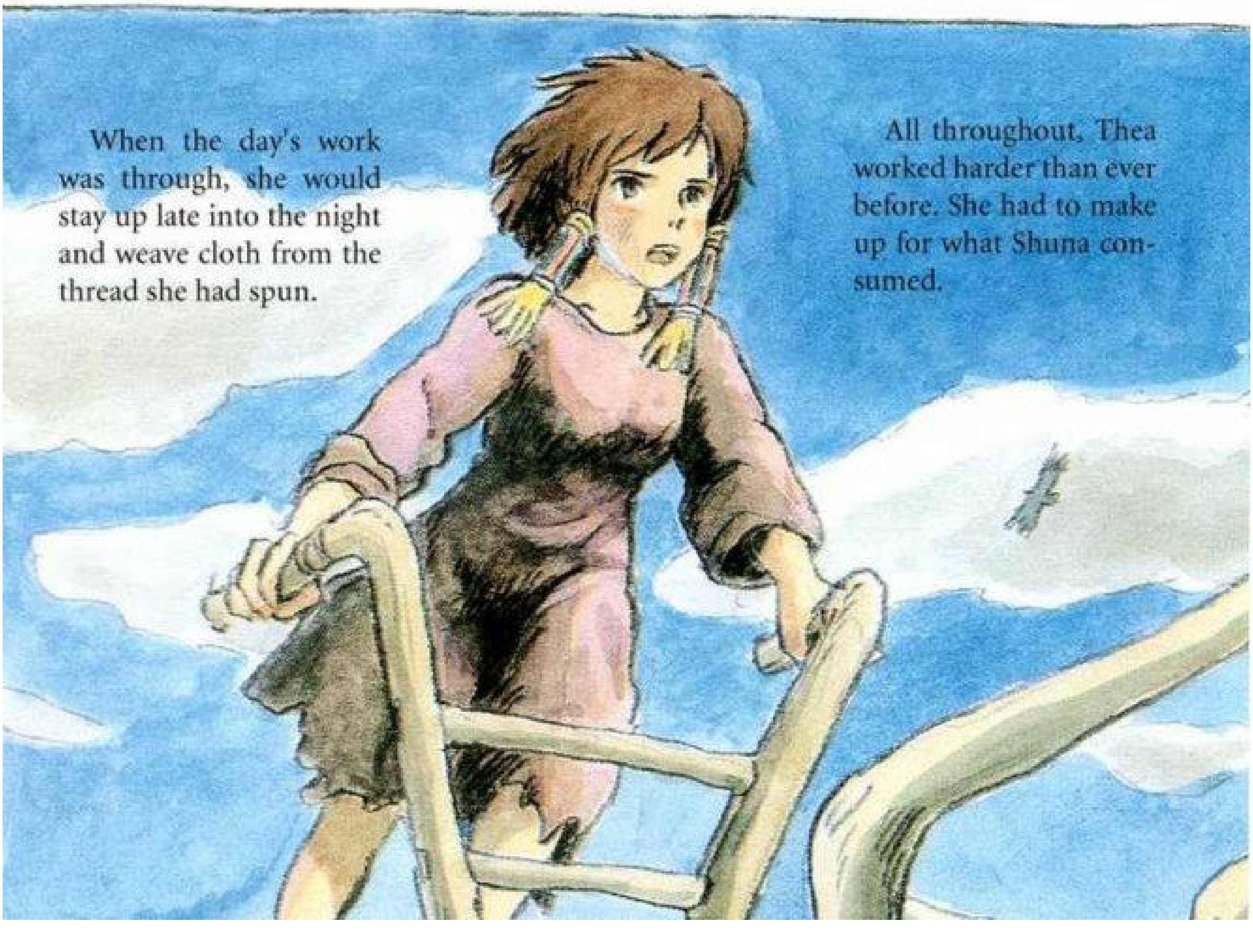
She ploughed the rough land to make a small plot where no-one would see, and piled up the rocks she dug up to make a small hide-away for Shuna.



Everyday, when people were still sleeping, Thea would bring him food and water. The old woman never ceased to complain at the rate at which the food was disappearing but Thea continued to feed him, though it meant less for herself.

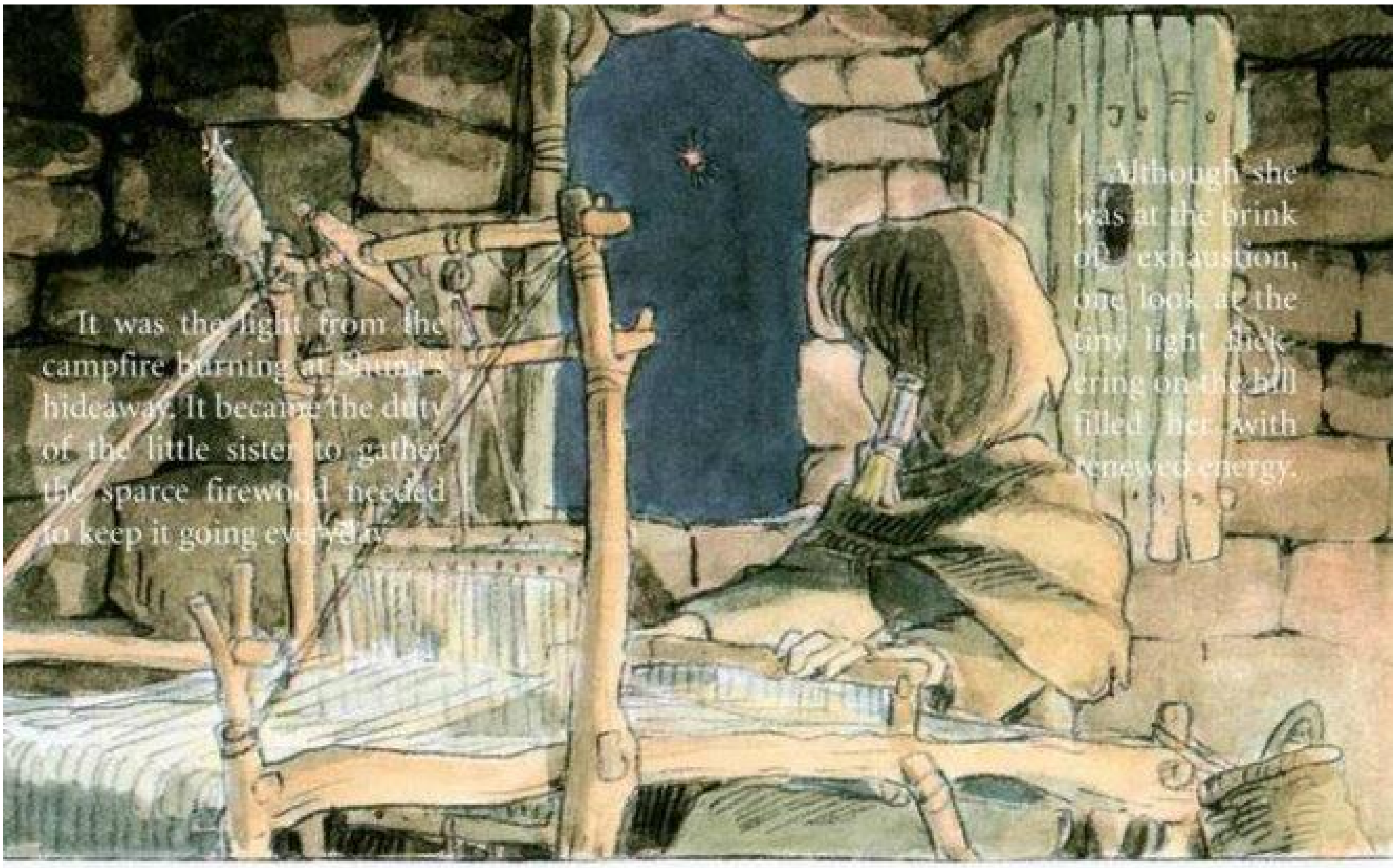


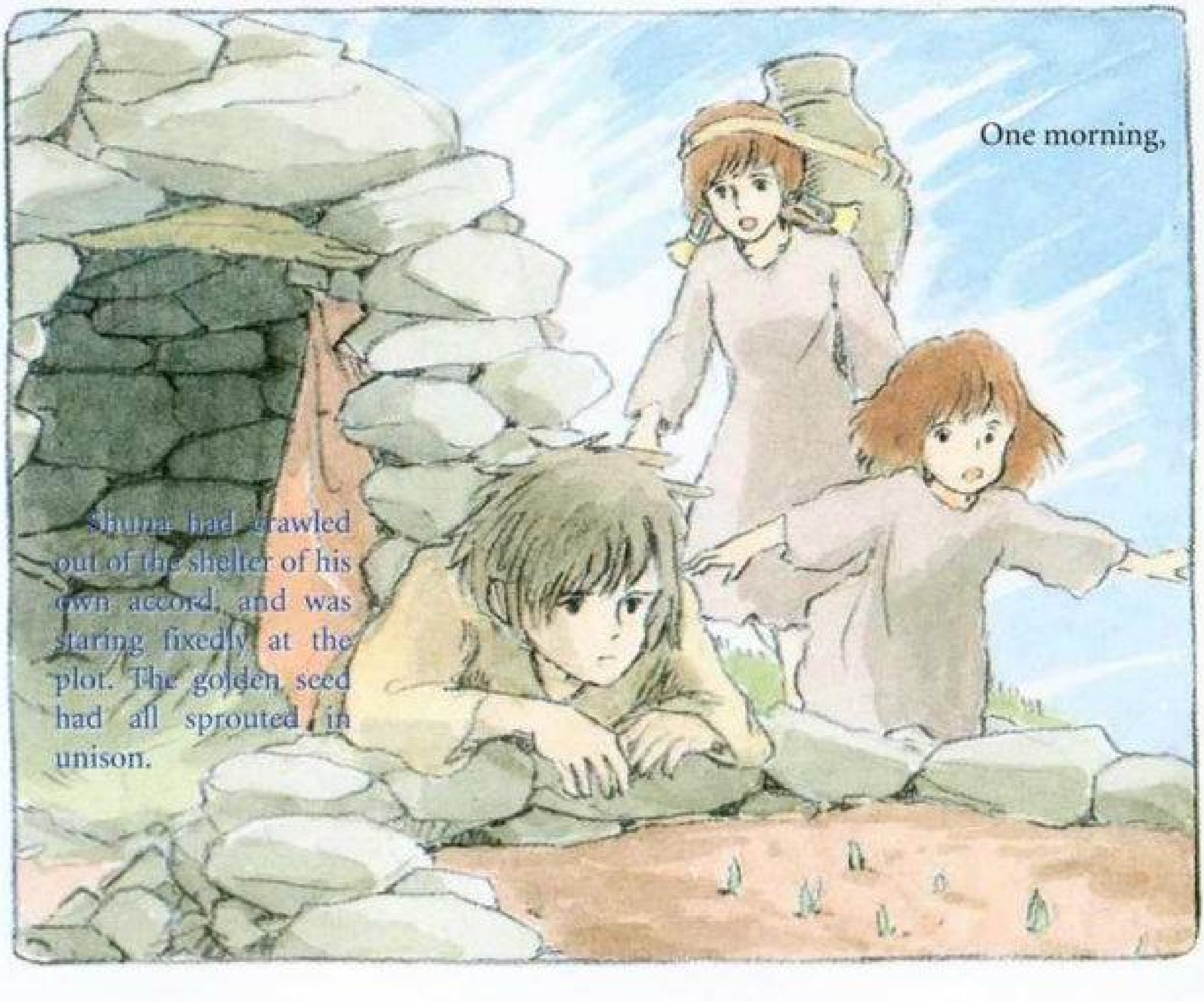
Shuna kept the pouch clutched to his chest, not making much effort to plant the seeds. Thea patiently showed him how to, but during the night, he would dig up the seeds and return them to the pouch.

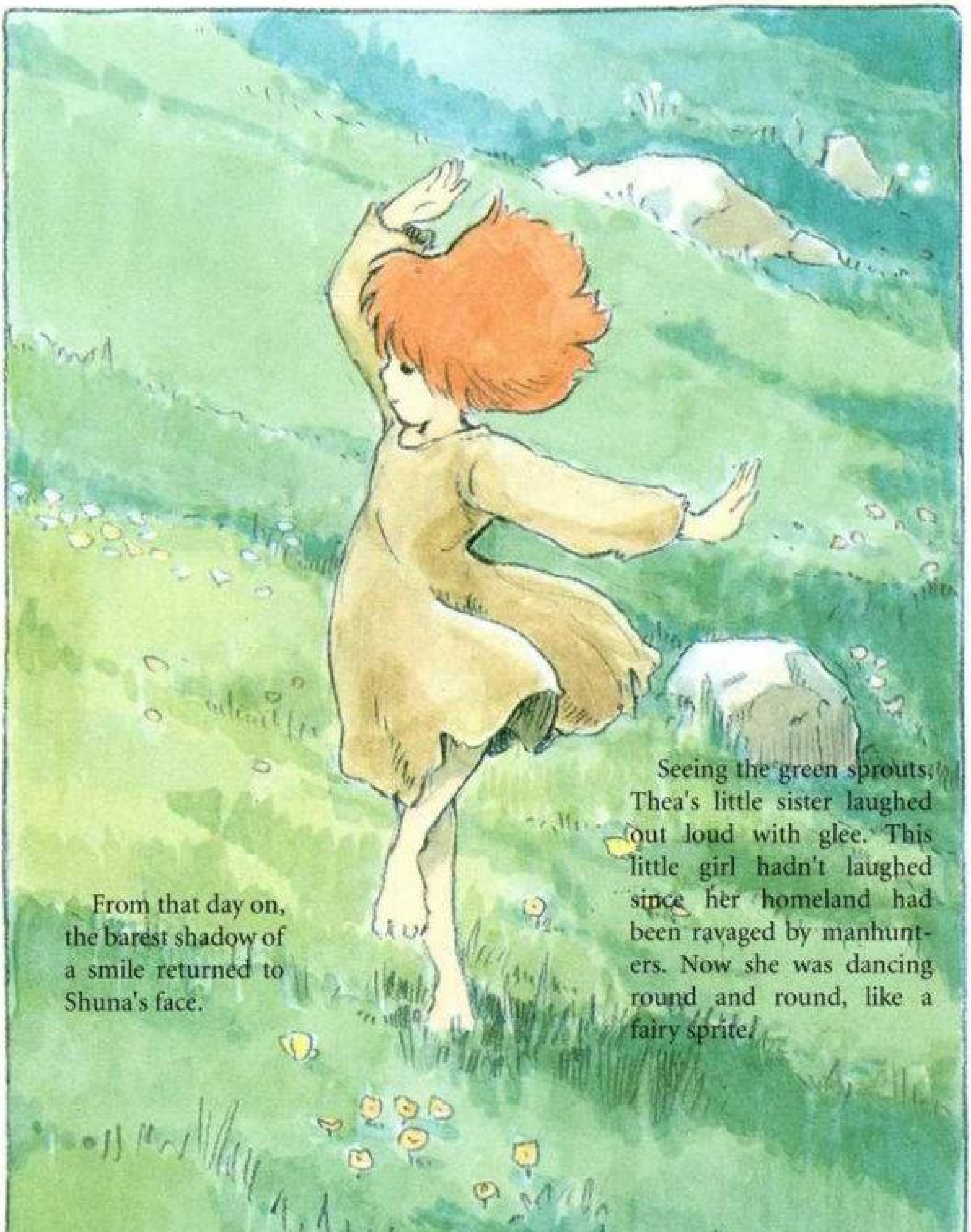


When the day's work was through, she would stay up late into the night and weave cloth from the thread she had spun.

All throughout, Thea worked harder than ever before. She had to make up for what Shuna consumed.


It was the light from the campfire burning at Shuna's hideaway. It became the duty of the little sister to gather the sparce firewood needed to keep it going everyday.
Although she was at the brink of exhaustion, one look at the tiny light flickering on the hill filled her with renewed energy.


One morning,
Shuna had crawled out of the shelter of his own accord, and was staring fixedly at the plot. The golden seed had all sprouted in unison.



From that day on, the barest shadow of a smile returned to Shuna's face.

Seeing the green sprouts, Thea's little sister laughed out loud with glee. This little girl hadn't laughed since her homeland had been ravaged by manhunters. Now she was dancing round and round, like a fairy sprite.

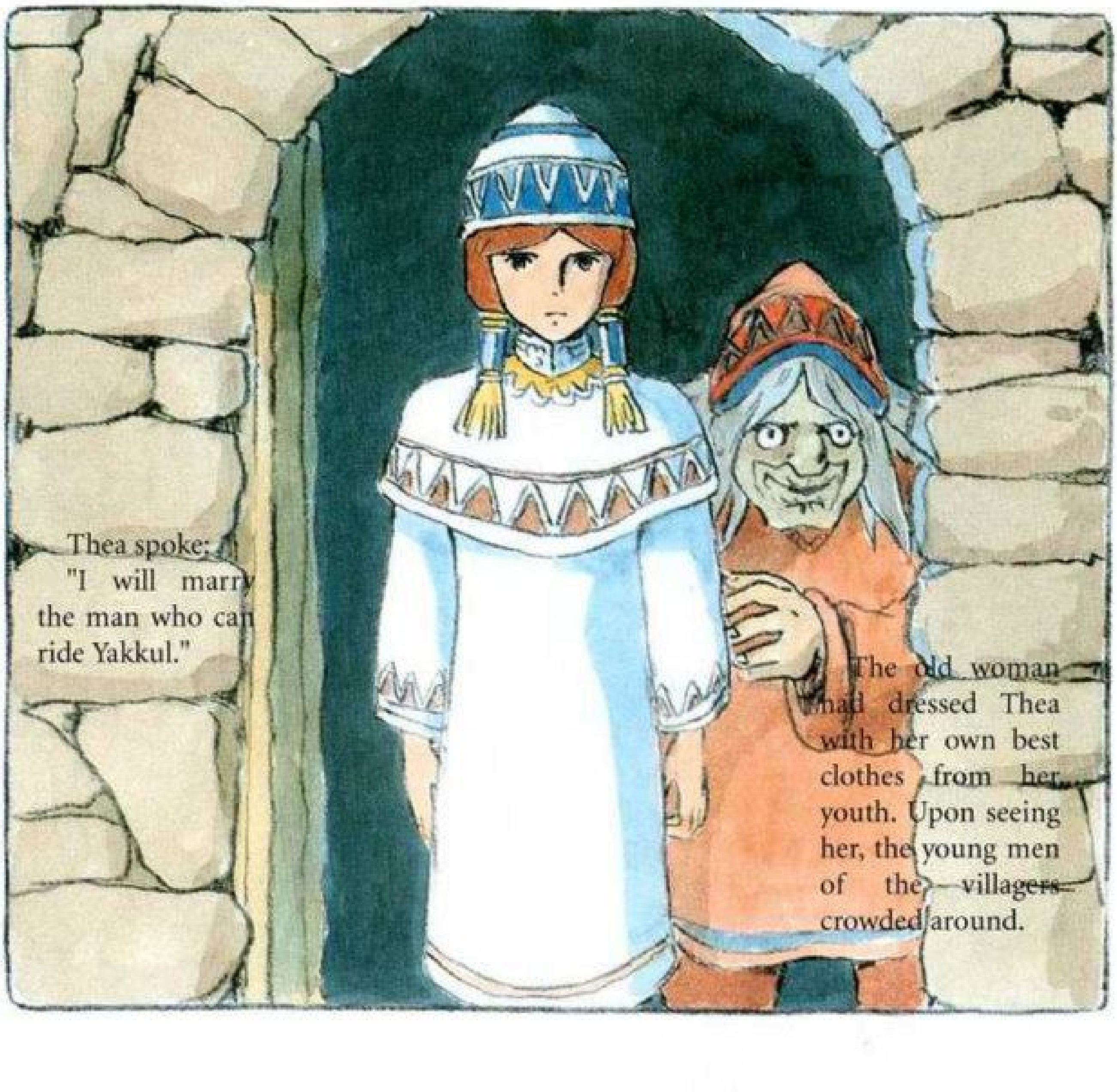


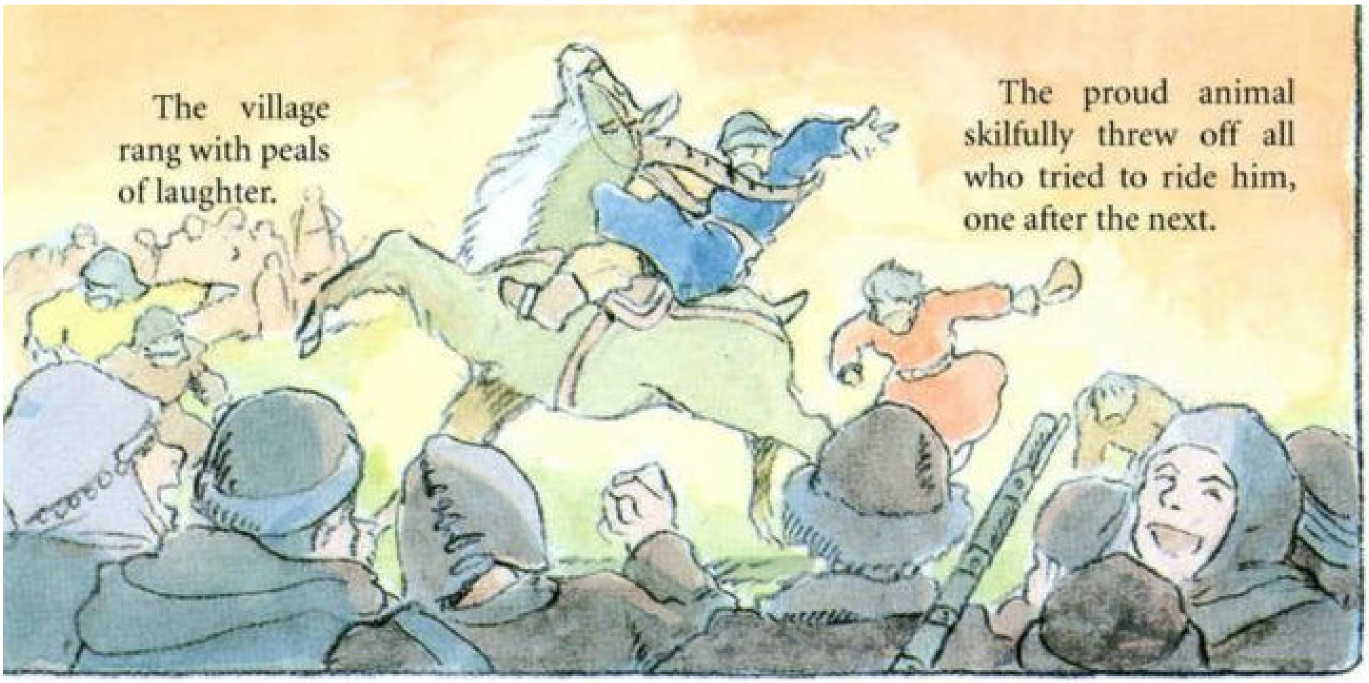
"If you don't like it, you're out of my house." She would pay no attention to Thea's protests. Thea worked on clothes for Shuna from the cloth she had woven.

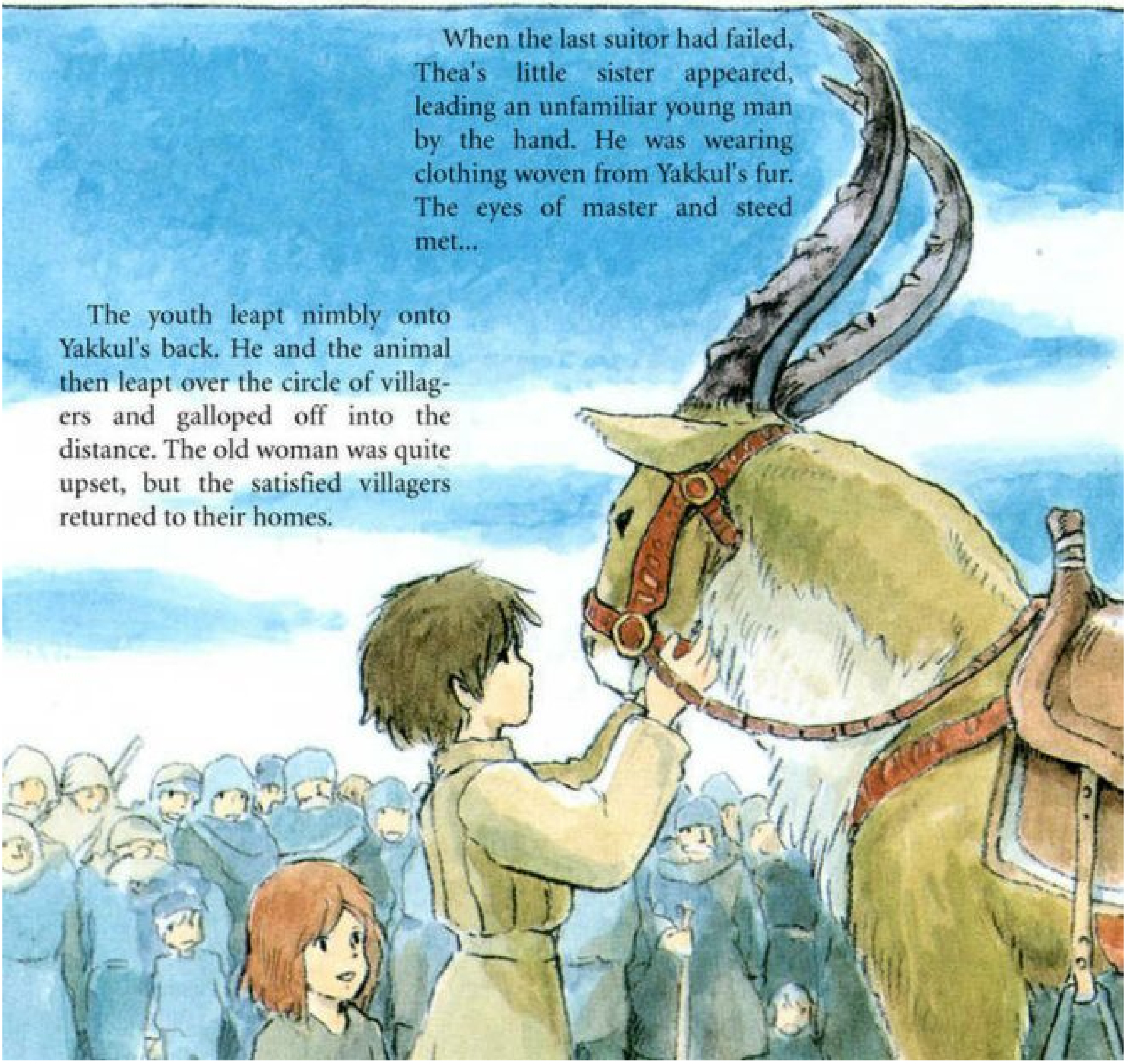
One day when the summer solstice was at hand, the old woman pulled Thea aside. "You're of age to be wed off, and I want another strong working hand." She wanted Thea to choose a husband from the young village men.



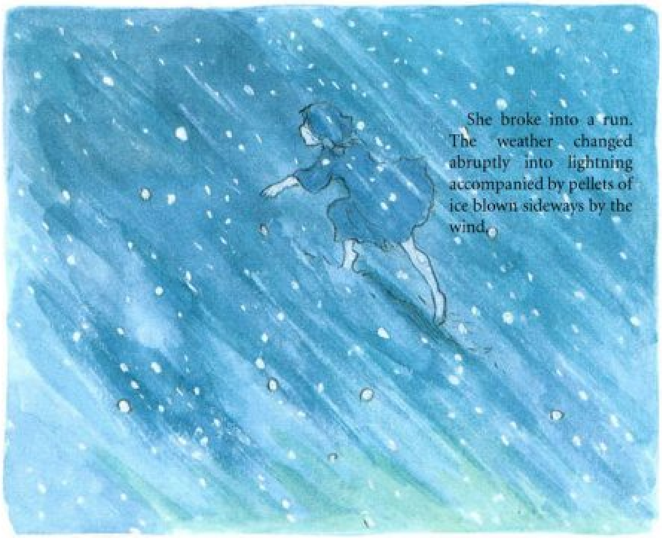

That day, Thea was to make a show of choosing a husband in front of all the villagers.


Thea spoke: "I will marry the man who can ride Yakkul."
The old woman had dressed Thea with her own best clothes from her youth. Upon seeing her, the young men of the villagers crowded around.

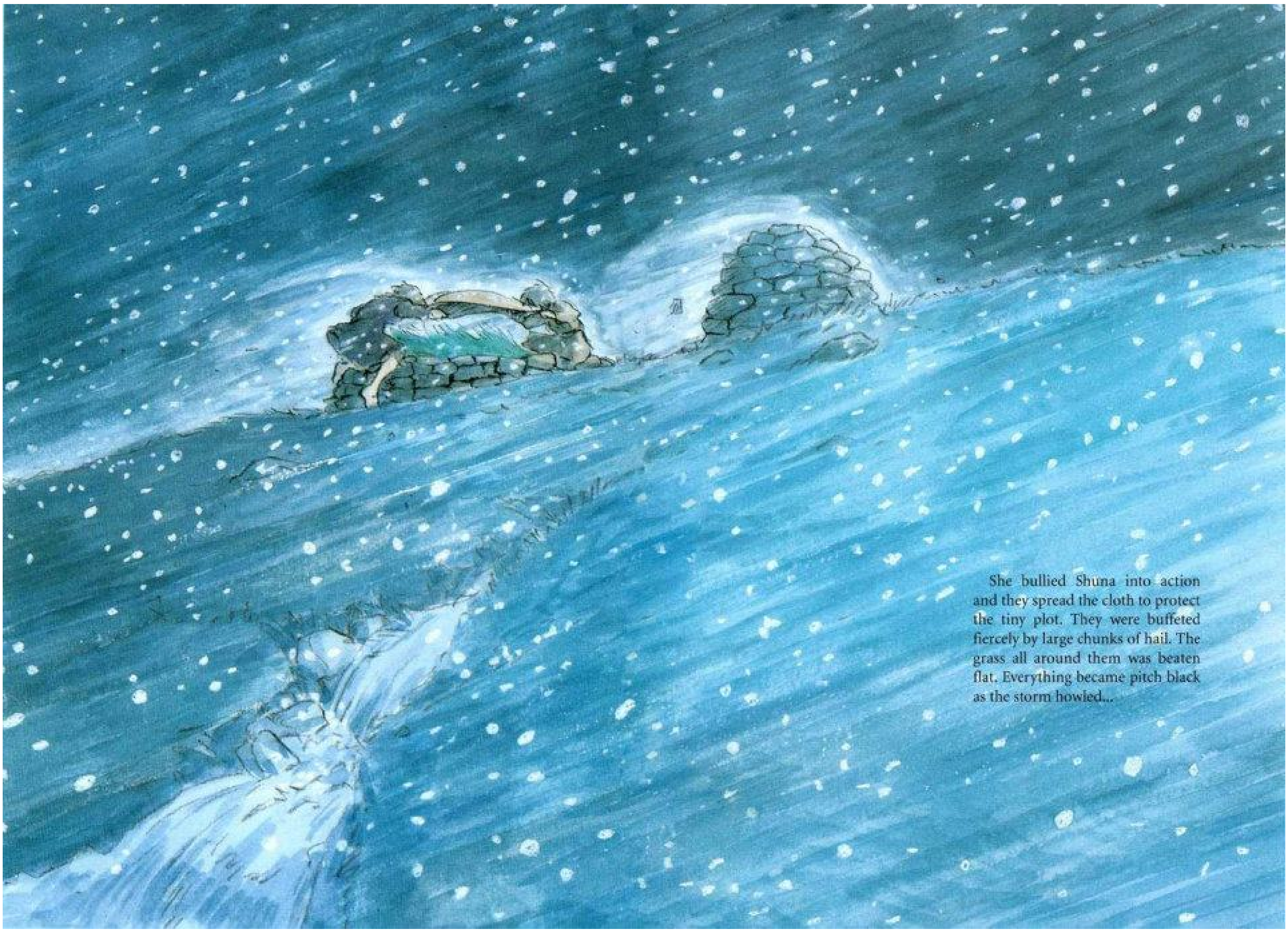

The village rang with peals of laughter.
The proud animal skilfully threw off all who tried to ride him, one after the next.

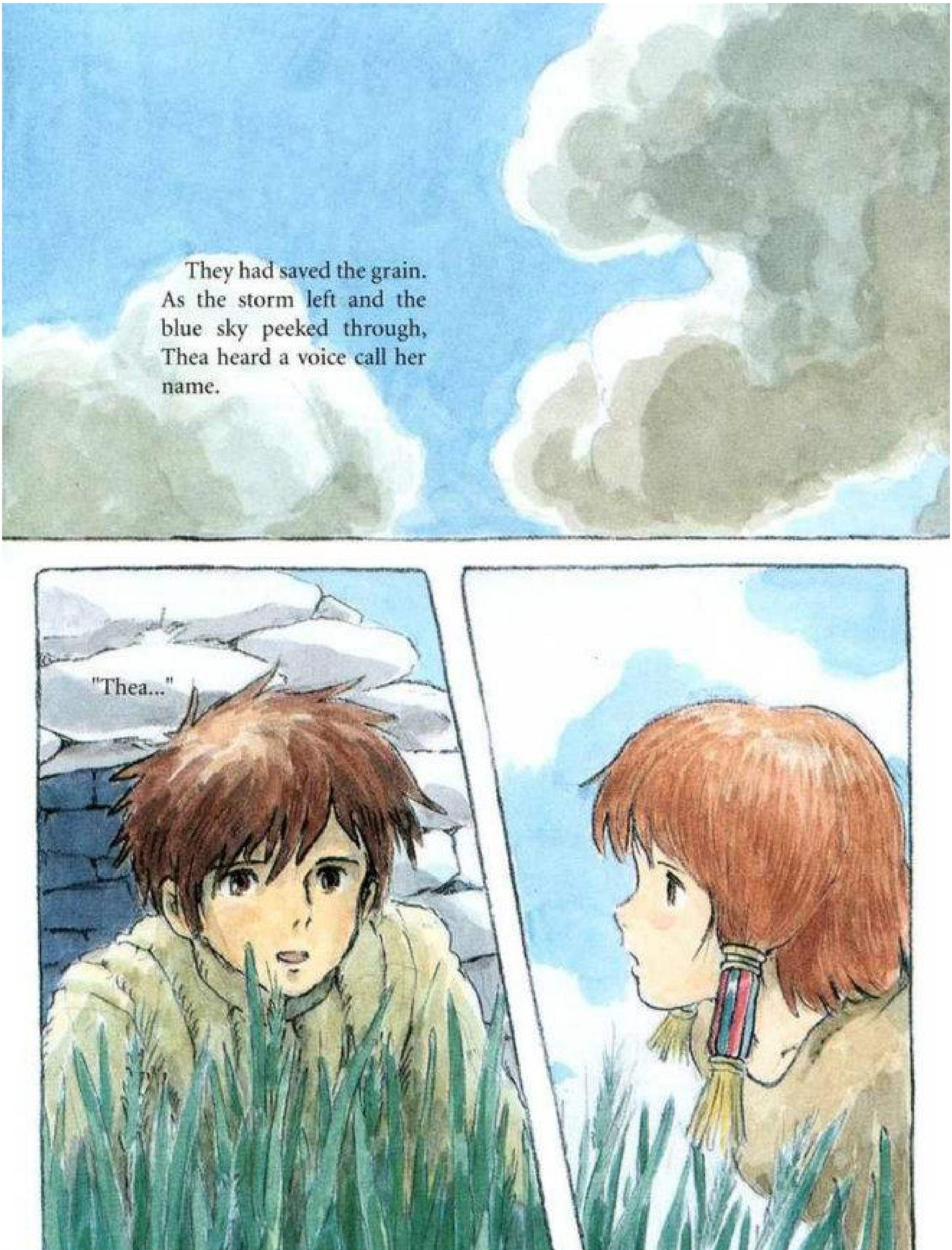

When the last suitor had failed, Thea's little sister appeared, leading an unfamiliar young man by the hand. He was wearing clothing woven from Yakkul's fur. The eyes of master and steed met...
The youth leapt nimbly onto Yakkul's back. He and the animal then leapt over the circle of villagers and galloped off into the distance. The old woman was quite upset, but the satisfied villagers returned to their homes.

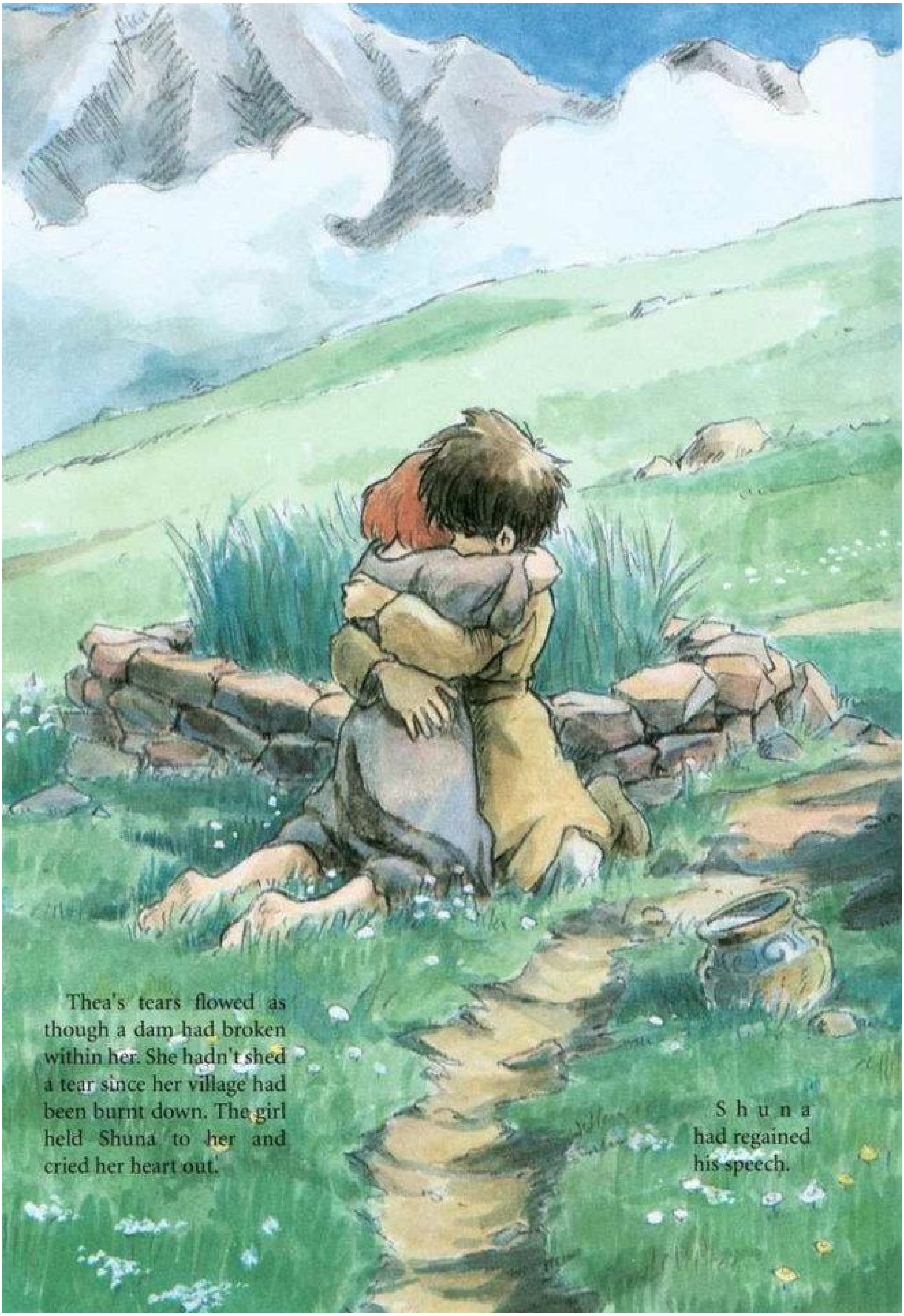

The fleeting summer of the north had arrived. The tiny plot of land had grown green, healthy and luxuriant. Shuna's expression became more healthy with it.


She broke into a run. The weather changed abruptly into lightning accompanied by pellets of ice blown sideways by the wind.


One fine sunny day, Thea had gone out to cut hay at a distant pasture.
Out of nowhere blew a cold wind. Large black clouds rolled off of the mountains.

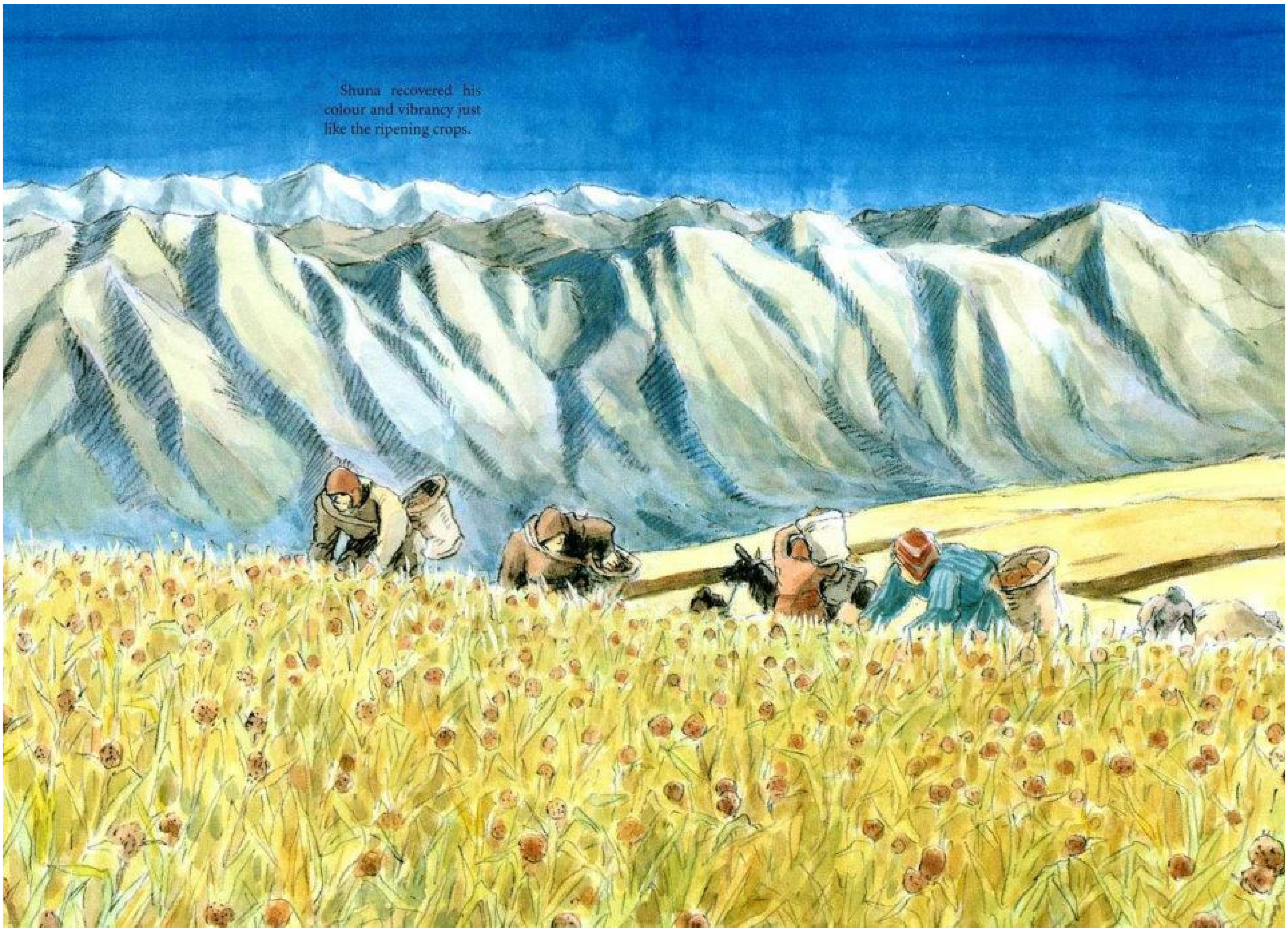

She bullied Shuna into action and they spread the cloth to protect the tiny plot. They were buffeted fiercely by large chunks of hail. The grass all around them was beaten flat. Everything became pitch black as the storm howled...


They had saved the grain. As the storm left and the blue sky peeked through, Thea heard a voice call her name.
"Thea..."

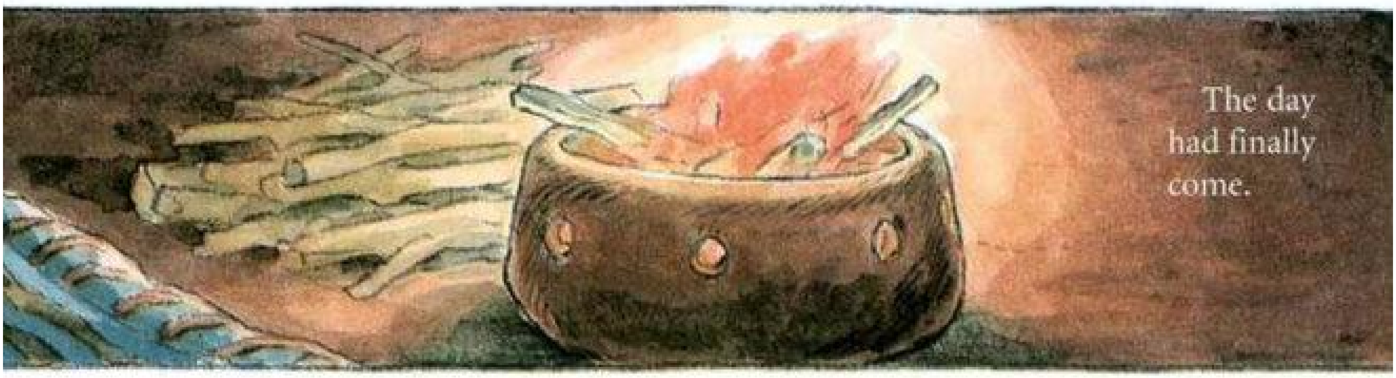


Thea's tears flowed as though a dam had broken within her. She hadn't shed a tear since her village had been burnt down. The girl held Shuna to her and cried her heart out.

Shuna had regained his speech.


Shuna recovered his colour and vibrancy just like the ripening crops.


Autumn...


The day
had finally
come.


Somebody is
knocking at the
door.
Thea opened it.



There stood Shuna, cradling a bundle of freshly-cut wheat, looking as though he had just returned from a long journey.

"Shuna..."


The moon continued to span the heavens, and the manhunters still wandered the land, but here was a pair who had overcome at least one trial.
The boy and girl sat down side by side, filled with a deep, quiet joy.
It was over...

When the day came for their departure, he left the village people with half of the golden seeds.

The villagers didn't want to let them go. The old woman bemoaned not being able to wed Thea to one of the young men of the village and presented her with her late husband's shotgun.

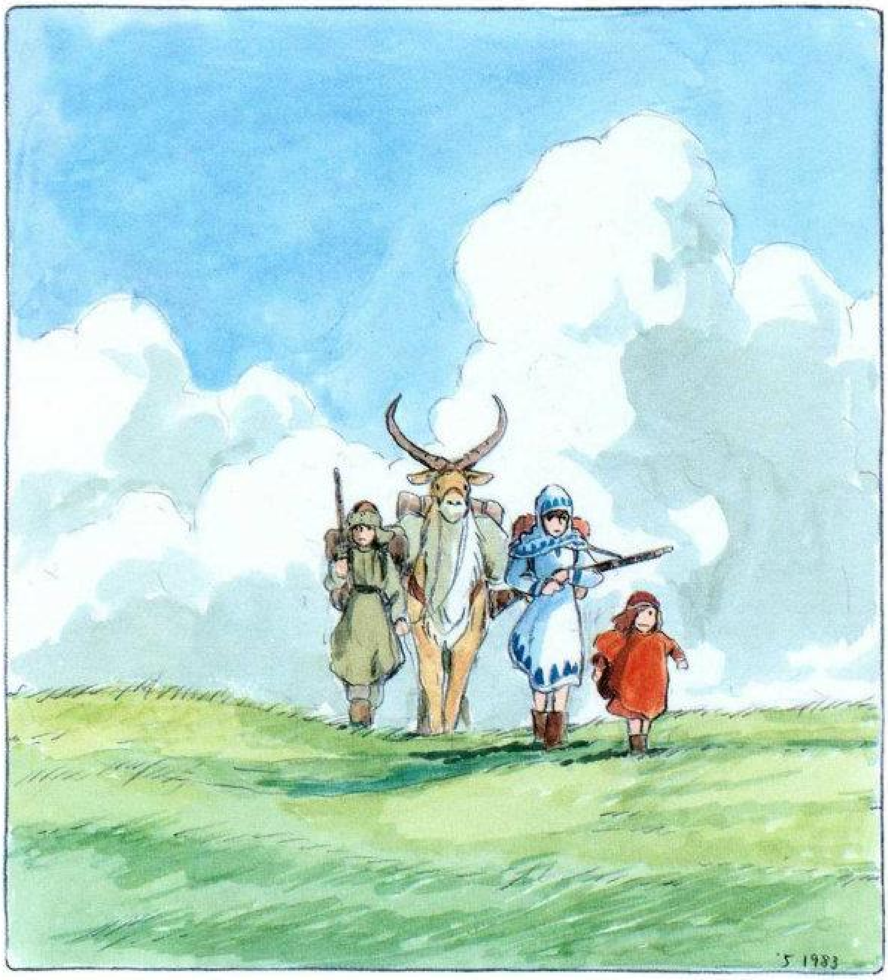




In order to return to his homeland, Shuna remained in the village for another year. He fought alongside the villagers against the attacks of manhunters and helped to drive back the encroaching desert land. Meanwhile, the wheat field spread. The seed from the previous crop made for an even bigger yield.

Shuna's journey wasn't over yet. It was a long way to his village. The hardships would undoubtedly continue.

...but that is a story best saved for another time.



おしまい
– The End

Post Script

This story was based off of a folk tale from Tibet called "The prince who became a dog". The story was about a prince of a certain country who, distressed over the lack of grain that his poor citizens had, after a difficult journey, stole some barley seeds from the dragon king. For doing that, he was changed into a dog by means of magic but was saved by the love of a girl and was finally able to bring the barley back to his country.

Currently, Tibet is the only country in the world which has barley as their staple food. It is said that barley spread from Asia to the rest of the world. That is why the content which says that the Prince headed west in his journey coincides with history. Rather than saying that this folk tale was something which really happened it is better to think of it as the people of Tibet created this story out of thanks towards their crops. Since I read this story ten years ago my only dream was to make this an animation, but in modern day Japan, a simple story like this would not pass at all. Not only that but I gave up trying to get it animated in China as well. Still, this time I had the support of the publishers and I thought up my own sort of version of the story.